

# yoga perspectives

## a new series

Frank Klinckenberg interviews Mia Forbes Pirie  
about the upcoming Yoga Perspectives series



*Q: What is Yoga Perspectives?*

**MFP:** Yoga Perspectives is a new series in *Yoga & Health* magazine, starting in March. The series explores different parts of the body through different Yoga traditions and perspectives. It's based on interviews with leading teachers from different traditions, their teachings, materials they have produced and experiences. It focuses on the similarities and differences between different Yoga traditions (Ashtanga, Iyengar-based, and Yin). It looks at the physical, emotional, and spiritual sides of Yoga. I have interviewed some of the top teachers from these three traditions, including Aadil Palkhivala, Chuck Miller, Hamish Hendry, Kino MacGregor, Paul Grilley, Ruth White and Sarah Powers, as well as David Gorman, an expert in anatomy, Alexander technique and his own technique, Learning Methods.

*"A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT TRADITIONS ARE VALID"*

*Q: Why is it important to you to explore the various Yoga traditions?*

**MFP:** For a number of reasons. In part, I was inspired by a quote from Jane Sill, the editor of Y&H magazine: "I feel it is important to keep an 'open mind' in Yoga while staying true to its classical roots. As Editor, I have always tried to maintain this openness of outlook, welcoming articles from all traditions to allow readers to make up their own minds and to find a path which is most suitable to their needs." Also, when I had just started Yoga, I read a book by Godfrey Devereux who said that different types of Yoga are like tributaries all running into the same river with the same final destination. That has always been my perspective and Jane seemed to share that view. I wanted to put that view across in an interesting and accessible way.

*Q: Do you feel that the different traditions are necessary?*

**MFP:** I think that a number of different traditions are valid. When I interviewed Chuck Miller, one of the things he said to me resonated - he said that if the Yoga tradition that you belong to is valid, it will stand up to scrutiny. It will hold up to questioning and exploration of different traditions. Paul Grilley told me that it is important, in this day and age, for the mind to be open to different traditions. I completely agree with that. There are a lot of overlaps too. In my interview with Ruth White, she said that the postures are the same - just practised differently (between Iyengar and Ashtanga). Hamish Hendry told me that there is no limit to the amount of time you can spend in a posture in Ashtanga, which would give you a different way of achieving some of the results of Yin Yoga. I guess that, in the end, it's a personal choice. Many of the teachers I interviewed also said something that I agree with completely: that it is useful to explore different traditions but ultimately it is helpful to then choose and go deeper in one. If you do not go deeply into one tradition, you risk staying on the surface of Yoga and you miss something. Equally, however, you can learn new insights from different traditions and they will bring something to your main practice.

*Q: Does it feel to you like all traditions are part of the same family?*

**MFP:** Ultimately yes, but I feel that there is an irony in the Yoga world, that people go around thinking "my tradition is better than yours". I've heard Iyengar-based yogis at workshops talking about how dangerous Ashtanga adjustments are and Ashtangis talking about how obsessed Iyengars are with alignment. I feel that Yoga is meant to be about "union" and "oneness" - and that the disrespect between valid traditions flies in the face of what Yoga is really about. I think we can all gain something from different traditions whilst staying true to our own.

*Q: What is that something?*

**MFP:** Good question. I think if your main practice is Ashtanga, you can gain knowledge of the postures and alignment from Iyengar. And if it is Iyengar, you may learn about the flow and the importance of the breath from Ashtanga. From Yin, you can gain a greater ability to stretch the connective tissue. From David Gorman's work on Alexander Technique and Learning Methods, we can all learn that using the whole body is much more liberating and freeing than observing the parts and we can tap into the natural intelligence of the

body which, I think, is what Sri K Pattabhi Jois had in mind when he said that Yoga is "99% practice, 1% theory". David Gorman helps teach how to explore one's body very well. Kino MacGregor teaches this in a different way, through the integration of breath and bandha.

*Q: What are the main differences between traditions?*

**MFP:** I believe that Iyengar, Ashtanga and Yin work from different perspectives: Iyengar tries to align the body so that the energy can flow through the correct channels and then the full posture can eventually be completed. Ashtanga starts at the other end: by completing the posture, which is essentially a mudra (allowing the energy to flow in a certain cleansing way), we can then straighten out and align which will allow the energy to flow through the correctly aligned channels better. Yin focuses on getting the energy flowing better in the body in a different way, with the focus on the meridians in particular.

*Q: Yin appears to be a quieter practice, while Ashtanga is more energetic - do you think it will work the same for everyone?*

**MFP:** Funnily enough, I read something by Sarah Powers about this today, which I agree with. Different people are drawn to different types of Yoga - and those types may be perfect for them. However, they may be drawn to the things that are already strong in them and then they don't start to look at their less-developed side.

On the other hand, I think that if you stick long enough with a tradition, it will expose all your weaknesses and if you want to go deeper, you will have to confront them. My personal experience with Ashtanga is that I started off very gung-ho with it. Through injuries, I have learned to listen to my body and develop a much quieter side to my practice. Other traditions have helped me do this, but I might have got there eventually though Ashtanga alone - we will never know! I do think it is possible and it would probably have happened. Injuries can be quite humbling experiences and are great teachers - there is a silver lining, even if you don't see that right away!  
*"FORGET EVERYTHING I HAVE TOLD YOU AND SKI DOWN THE MOUNTAIN"*

*Q: Why do you focus on different body parts? Is this more or less important than to focus on the whole body, or on body-mind?*

**MFP:** No, I think the whole body (and integration) is much more important than body parts. The body is interlinked and no part operates without affecting another. I think this also comes out in the articles. But it is also interesting to explore what you can do for one part of the body and it can be helpful especially for teachers to read more about this. And, it's a good starting point for exploring Yoga!

*Q: Fair enough - so, can you say a bit more about the value of looking at the whole and the parts?*

**MFP:** I think it's useful, especially for teachers, and a little knowledge of anatomy is helpful. I've learned from David Gorman and Kino MacGregor, in particular - but others also - that using the natural intelligence of the body is the best way to practise, to find the freedom and ease in the body that we are all looking for. I find it useful though to have an understanding of what is going on in the different parts. It gives pointers for the inner exploration that we do in our practices - but it has its limitations and there is a risk that focusing on parts will limit us in our practice. Each part of the body is connected in some way to every other part and I think a big part of Yoga is learning to trust ourselves and learning to trust our bodies as well as being patient.

Ultimately, I think we all need to decide through our own experience what works best for us - and be open to change. I know that I don't fully trust the natural intelligence of my body yet and I find the pointers helpful. But I also find the freedom I have found in my practice incredible. It has helped me a lot. I think my approach is best described by what my favourite ski instructor, Tino Fuchs, once said to me. I asked him to break something down for me so I could fully understand it - he did, he answered my question in great detail, explaining all the movements and transference of weight. He then asked me whether I understood. I said "yes". He said "OK then. Forget everything I have told you and ski down the mountain!"

*Q: Why did you select each of the interviewees? What do they bring in your view?*

**MFP:** They are all great and inspirational teachers – all people I have learnt from and been greatly inspired by and they are all exceptional in their tradition/technique. Each one is extraordinary and they are all people I trust and whose opinions I respect deeply. I feel honoured that they have given me so much of their time and so many insights.

*Q: Can you say a bit more about each of them?*

**MFP:** They come from different traditions and have all explored Yoga in a unique, and very inspirational way. I encountered a lot of humility. For example, Ruth White, who kindly agreed to do photos with me, suggested that it might be helpful for me to demonstrate corrections/adjustments on her that she had taught me, despite the fact that she didn't need them at all. There's much more to say about them than would fit in these pages now, but next month's issue of Y&H will have a piece describing each of them.

**"DON'T PERFORM, EXPLORE"**

*Q: What inspired you the most in the meetings with the interviewees? What did you take away from it?*

**MFP:** This is a very difficult question. Every meeting with each person was incredibly rich. They are all incredibly knowledgeable and wise people. I can say that I feel the better for having spoken to each of them and I learned so much from everyone. In some ways, they clarified my ideas and in some ways they challenged them. You'll have to read the articles to find out what I took away from it ... but I guess there are two things that really stand out. These are summarised by quotes from Chuck Miller and Aadil Palkhivala - but most of the teachers I spoke to expressed these same things in different ways. The first, from Chuck and Maty's website: "Yoga is the resolution of opposition" - nothing is black or white, especially in Yoga - Yoga is about finding balance and there can be no dogmas. The other is what Aadil expresses best - he counsils students not to perform but to explore. If you make one New Year's resolution this year - I would recommend it to be that one: "Don't perform, Explore." - in Yoga and in life - cultivate your inner experience and the rest will follow. Or, as Pattabhi Jois would say: "Practice, all is coming".

*Q: What surprised you most in the interviews?*

**MFP:** It's all a lot simpler than we make it! The richness of Hamish's simple answers to my questions gave me an inkling to that which only deepened as I interviewed other exceptional teachers. I was also surprised at how little interest many of the teachers showed in talking about pure asana. All of them had gone way beyond *asana* and had come to the realisation that the physical form, although an important vehicle, is one of the least important things in Yoga. I have discussed, with Ruth White, Stefan Engstrom and Chuck Miller, the effect of the energy of *Mulha Bandha* which many Yoga traditions use. It is subject to misinterpretation, so I don't want to get into it too deeply here - but it is similar to looking for balance and full-body integration when done correctly - I will discuss that further in the articles.

*Q: How do you think readers can apply the information in this series for themselves?*

**MFP:** I hope that more than anything else it will help readers to broaden their minds and ask themselves more questions. I had initially thought of it as a technical guide and there will be some of that but more than anything I'm hoping it will help them progress in their practices and in their lives by encouraging them to develop deeper, more self-loving practices.

*Q: How will you apply it?*

**MFP:** I have already started to apply it - to good benefit in my practice and in my life. I enjoy my practice more, am more self loving and less judgmental and critical of myself. I had an injury for a long while which came, basically, from not listening to my body sufficiently. I am learning that if I listen to my body, I can trust it. I am learning to push less and to listen more. I hope that these articles will open this up to others as well.

*{Details on page 47}.*



a new series

# yoga perspectives

by Mia Forbes Pirie



The idea for the Yoga Perspectives series was simple: interview some of the best Yoga teachers in the world from different traditions, report on what they had say about parts of the body and allow readers to benefit from the knowledge of these experts. Teachers interviewed include Aadil Palkhivala, Chuck Miller, Hamish Hendry, Kino MacGregor, Paul Grilley, Ruth White and Sarah Powers, as well as David Gorman, an expert in anatomy, the Alexander Technique and his own technique, LearningMethods.

Between them, they have over 200 years' experience of Yoga and talking to them leaves me in no doubt that their accumulated wisdom goes far beyond those years. Yoga Perspectives draws on the knowledge of these extraordinary people, allowing us to benefit from rich insights from different paths. Whether readers are dedicated to a single tradition or exploring others, insights from these teachers will expand their perspectives and horizons and maybe even change their Yoga practices and lives.

As John Lennon said, 'Life's what happens to you while you're busy making other plans'. When I embarked on this project, I had no idea it would turn out the way it did. It has truly been shaped by these masters and by the influence of the wider team of people who have helped me bring the series together. At every turn, my views have been both challenged and supported, and the series and I are the richer for it.

## Teachers interviewed for the series

### Aadil Palkhivala

(Iyengar-asana-based, Purna Yoga) is an exceptional 'teacher of teachers'. He started practising Yoga with BKS Iyengar at the age of 7. By the age of 22, he had become a senior teacher. Aadil now teaches Purna Yoga (meaning Complete Yoga). Purna Yoga is based on Sri Aurobindo's concept and uses what Aadil considers to be the 'best in each field' of: meditation, asana, pranayama, applied philosophy, nutrition and lifestyle. The asana Aadil teaches is Iyengar-style.

A charming, paternal figure, Aadil inspires complete confidence, and the depth and breadth of his knowledge are impressive. As well as teaching Yoga, Aadil is a naturopath and health practitioner with a number of degrees under his belt. Dedicated to teaching spirituality and personal transformation, his book 'Heart of Fire' is moving as well as inspirational. In one workshop, many years ago, Aadil taught me, for the first time, to truly feel a connection to my legs and to use them actively in my practice.

### Chuck Miller

(Ashtanga Yoga) has a strong, beautiful and calm presence, which brings the qualities of peace, love, focus and attention into a room. He has practised Yoga since 1971. A phenomenal Yoga teacher, he usually teaches with his partner Maty Ezraty (together they were the original owners of YogaWorks). More than postures, he teaches how

to respect and be kind to the body whilst exploring Yoga and consciousness. He and Maty teach us to take responsibility for ourselves and our bodies in our practices. A time-tested certified Ashtanga teacher, he is deeply dedicated to Ahimsa (non-violence) and teaches this with grace, love and compassion, inspiring practitioners all over the world to be true to themselves when practicing. Chuck embodies a paradoxical combination of radiating peace whilst, at the same time, being quite intense. This is manifested, among others, in the wonderfully gentle and strong adjustments he gives. During one workshop, he gave me a fabulous adjustment in Tadasana and - although challenging to hold - for the first time in years, I felt weightless.

### David Gorman

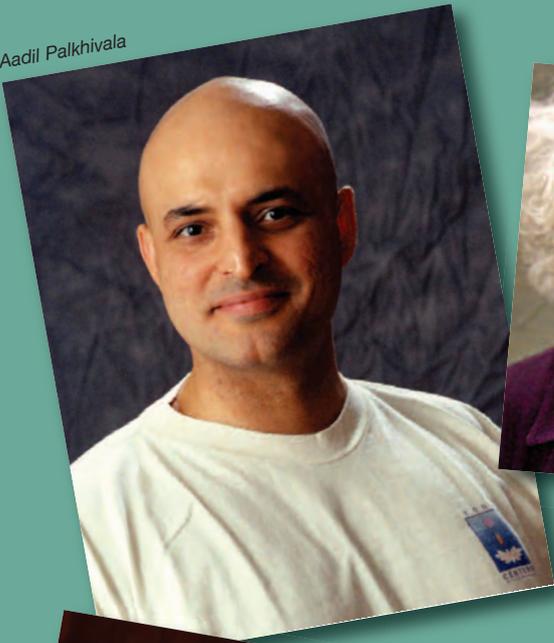
(Anatomy, Alexander Technique and LearningMethods) is not a Yoga teacher, although he teaches a lot of Yoga teachers. He was introduced to me by my good friend and wonderful Yoga teacher, Stefan Engstrom. Stefan told me I would love David's teachings. He was right. A respected expert in the Alexander Technique community, with a deeper knowledge of anatomy and physiology than anyone I have ever met, David is very unassuming. With a number of detailed anatomy books to his name, David has developed his own method called LearningMethods, which goes beyond the usual territory of the Alexander Technique and taps into the natural intelligence of the body. He is very down to earth and answers questions in plain English with no references to energy or anything which could be interpreted as ethereal. He focuses on the experience and helps his students to do the same. Deeply practical, he would not profess to be teaching Yoga or spirituality - and yet - in my opinion, he is one of the most yogic and spiritual people I have met. His workshop transformed my world - the way I walk, stand, move and think - and the way that I do my Yoga practice. After his workshop, I had one of the best Yoga practices of my life, I just allowed myself to feel supported and used the body's natural intelligence - it was very beautiful. He has a lot to offer the Yoga community.

### Hamish Hendry

(Ashtanga Yoga) is probably the leading Ashtanga practitioner and teacher in the UK. You could not wish to meet a more down-to earth Yoga teacher. I have practised with Hamish for a while now and never cease to be amazed by the new insights he brings. Although he is humbly devoted to teaching Mysore Style Ashtanga Yoga at his small studio in London, his presence, perseverance, dedication and teaching have inspired students and fellow teachers all over the world. One of the first of the late Sri K Pattabhi Jois' students in the UK to have received the certification, he has a calm, unassuming way about him which belies an extraordinary depth of knowledge and experience. Guruji was extremely fond of Hamish and trusted him enormously, as does Sharath (Pattabhi Jois' grandson and now leader of the Ashtanga tradition). What distinguishes Hamish is his open-hearted love of the practice for students of all levels. Like Guruji, Hamish is equally excited for beginners and advanced

# meet the team

Aadil Palkhivala



Nina Grunfeld



Chuck Miller

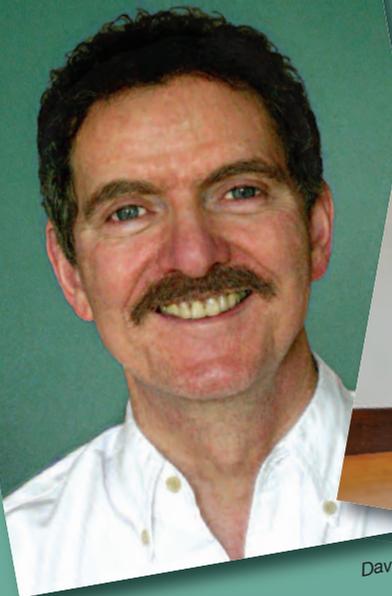


Sarah Powers



Hamish Hendry

Ruth White



David Gorman



Kino MacGregor



Paul Grilley

students who share the love of Ashtanga Yoga and are committed enough to show up on their mats every day. With a unique combination of technical awareness, knowledge of Sanskrit and traditional Yoga philosophy and an open heart, Hamish carries the torch of Ashtanga Yoga with integrity, compassion and wisdom.

### **Kino MacGregor**

(Ashtanga Yoga) is the youngest female teacher to have been certified by the late Sri K Pattabhi Jois. She is also an incredible woman, deeply dedicated to her path, whom I am happy to count among my closest friends. With no background in any physical discipline, Kino found Yoga through the search for inner peace, which she believes is at its heart. Kino was greatly inspired by Guruji's presence and, since meeting him she has dedicated her life to the spiritual path.

Kino is now one of a handful of Ashtanga practitioners practicing the challenging 4th Series in Mysore. Born flexible, with little body awareness, she herself says that she has had to work for every ounce of strength in her body – she shares her insights with others in her strength workshops, with impressive results. This (among other things) makes her a phenomenal teacher. She has a deep knowledge of the body and teaches how to use it holistically but she also has incredible heart and humility. One of her greatest gifts is the ability to see people's potential and teach them to access it and see it for themselves. Co-founder of the Miami Life Centre and the producer of three DVDs, as well as a number of podcasts, Kino travels the world sharing her passion for Yoga as an integrated approach to life transformation.

### **Paul Grilley**

(Yin Yoga and Anatomy) is an exceptional human being. With a commanding presence, down to earth and humouristic approach, he is highly engaging. His knowledge of anatomy is extremely deep and he is a scholar of Eastern philosophy and, in particular of Dr Hiroshi Motoyama's work (Taoist Meridian Theory and Acupuncture). Having a profound understanding of Yin Yoga, Anatomy and the Chakras, Paul has produced some exceptional DVDs on these topics.

Paul teaches that our bodies can be limited by bone on bone interaction (compression) and has thereby helped the Yoga community to accept that their bones may limit range of movement. We can all be grateful for this great gift of acceptance, which allows us to go deeper into real Yoga without being concerned about achieving a posture. Grilley has been the greatest force behind Yin Yoga's popularity - and that is also a great gift as it is a deep restorative system which assists not only with opening up the body and the connective tissue - which is more difficult to open with other practices - but also with helping energy to flow through the meridians properly - and developing a quiet and deep practice. He embodies the idea of 'being where you are', which is central to Yoga.

### **Nina Grunfeld**

(Life Clubs, Life Questions) set up Life Clubs 5 years' ago at age 50. Life Clubs are practical 90-minute workshops around the country which give people a clearer way of thinking about themselves and their lives. Her idea was that life coaching should be accessible to all, not just the rich and famous. She wanted a branch on every street corner and now has Life Clubs throughout the UK and as far afield as Canada. Inspirational and pragmatic mother of 4, Nina has written 3 books (her latest, *The Life Book*, is published January 2010) and a series of articles (*Get A Life*) for the Telegraph newspaper. I had the benefit of working with Nina when Life Clubs was small and to be one of her first hosts/coaches. Over the years, I have always found Nina to be inspirational, positive and supportive.

### **Ruth White**

(Iyengar-inspired, Karuna Yoga) is an incredible woman and an incredible 'teacher of teachers'. A senior student of Iyengar's, she developed Karuna-Yoga, which means 'The Yoga of Compassion'.

The asana she teaches is Iyengar-based and very powerful and she has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the tradition. Ruth's expertise is known and respected throughout the Yoga community, as is her dedication to teaching spirituality and the power of remaining in the present - in the now. She is passionate about ensuring that the teachers she trains not only have the technical knowledge required but also teach from the heart. Ruth makes time to mentor each of her teachers. She is exceedingly open-minded and, occasionally invites teachers from different traditions to her training courses.

I have been fortunate enough to have studied with Ruth on her teacher training course and am constantly impressed by her wisdom and humility. Ruth has boundless energy and is able to see people's potential and to carry them through their limitations.

### **Sarah Powers**

(Yin, Insight Yoga) radiates peace. An exceptional woman and teacher, she embodies Yin Yoga and Buddhist teachings. When she walks into a room, her presence immediately instils a deep sense of calmness to it. She has a peaceful, gentle, humble and inquisitive way about her and comes across as deeply loving and genuine. The Yoga she teaches is yin-style, based on acceptance and self-inquiry. Her Yoga and presence is transformational at a profound level. Although Sarah teaches Insight Yoga, she also practises other forms of Yoga, including Iyengar and Ashtanga Yoga on a regular basis and her teachings are inspired by different traditions. She is a Vipassana meditator, which comes across in her teachings, her DVDs and her recent book. At one of her workshops that I attended, she asked a question which transformed my whole practice. Whilst holding posture for a long time, she asked us to ask ourselves the question: 'What am I holding on to?' With that question came, for me, the deep realisation, that I (or my mind, at least) was creating tension that exists in my muscles and, that I have the power to release it.

### **Others who have helped and inspired the series**

In addition to those interviewed for the series, a number of people have been instrumental in its development. **Stefan Engstrom**, a good friend of mine and wonderful inspirational Yoga teacher, has provided advice and helped me to look outside the direct field of Yoga to **David Gorman's** incredible work, integrating whole body balance and movement, which has given a different and more holistic twist to the series. He and David also inspired some of the great discussions that I have had with teachers such as Chuck Miller, Kino MacGregor, Ruth White and Sarah Powers about the link between mula bandha and full-body balance.

One of my first Yoga teachers, **Alex Medin**, a certified Ashtanga teacher with a Masters in Sanskrit and Indian Religions, has also helped in providing advice, support and answering ad-hoc questions on Yoga and philosophy. Aside from interviewing me for the introductory article, **Frank Klinckenberg** has taken most of the photographs for this series. Others who have provided tremendous support and inspiration include **Val Pirie**, **Jane Sill**, **Bob Moy** and a number of my previous Yoga teachers, including the late **Sri K Pattabhi Jois** who has been a great influence both on my practice and my life. **Leo Thomson**, a dedicated Vinyasa Krama Yoga teacher and practitioner, has relentlessly reminded me that more types of Yoga exists! Time constraints and the bounds of my own experience have prevented me from writing about other types and investigating them. Exploring these may be a future challenge.

All of these people from various disciplines have generously contributed their time to this series. This has allowed me to weave together what, I hope is a rich tapestry from the very fine, subtle threads which each of them has provided.

*Mia is a freelance writer, dedicated Yoga practitioner, qualified teacher, life-coach and environmental consultant. More details about her and the people described in the article can be found on page 47*

NEW  
SERIES

# yoga perspectives part 1

## stiff shoulders

by Mia Forbes Pirie

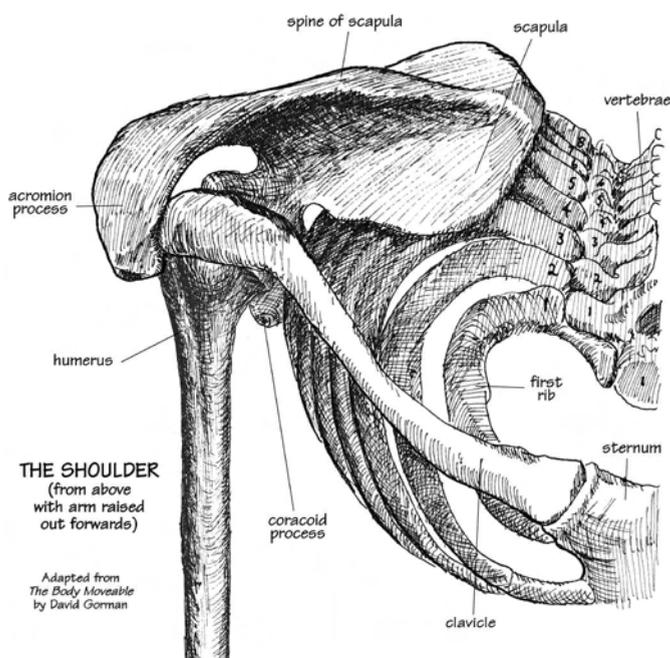


Senior Karuna teacher Ruth White (Tel: 01993 831032) and Mia Forbes Pirie in Handstand.

Like Atlas, we 'hold the weight of the world on our shoulders', so say both Ruth White and Kino MacGregor, world class teachers from different traditions and generations. Most of us hold stress and tension in our joints, particularly our shoulders. Practised correctly, Yoga helps us to release these tensions and bring us back into balance. Performed without awareness, however, it can compound the problem and even cause injury.

The shoulders, along with the knees and the lower back, are very prone to injuries whatever activity you engage in. This is because the shoulder joint is highly mobile and, therefore, inherently unstable. Common shoulder ailments include: dislocated shoulders, fractured shoulders, torn rotator cuffs, general instability, tendonitis, bursitis. In addition, tension held in the neck, shoulders and surrounding areas can lead to head-aches and migraines.

Senior Yoga teacher Chuck Miller emphasises that we need to learn to protect our shoulders and work to create joint health. Aadil Palkhivala, asks whether the shoulder should be 'opened', referring to the importance of strengthening the shoulder and the fact that we do not want to de-stabilise the shoulder joint but open the shoulder blade. Shoulders are a good example of how strength and flexibility can be so deeply intertwined. In order to gain flexibility in the shoulders without damaging them, we need to understand and strengthen them from within.



### How to use the shoulder in Yoga

The shoulder is much more mobile than the hips. Kino MacGregor, Asthanga Yoga expert, says that we should stop thinking about the shoulder in isolation and become more aware of its relation to the whole system: down to the lower ribs and even the pelvis; up through the neck to the head; and down the arms to the elbows, wrists and hands.

Flexibility in the shoulders comes not only from softening the stiff areas, emphasises Chuck Miller, but, more importantly, from strengthening the weak areas that can support the extension and range of motion. Aadil Palkhivala explains that when we talk of 'opening the shoulder', we are trying to open the shoulder blade and not the shoulder joint. The shoulder joint, in fact, needs to be strengthened. It is essential to develop strength in the right places to support and increase flexibility. Managing to raise our arms above our heads is less important than protecting the health of our joints.

As Chuck Miller says: "Making range of motion less important is contra-intuitive – but that is ultimately what gives us greater range of motion. If we just allow ourselves to go to our maximum range of motion in a gross, superficial way we are relying on our existing strength and our existing weakness. We are letting the weaknesses get weaker and the strong parts get stronger and are moving away from balance into a greater state of imbalance. In order to create that balance, there has to be an intelligent, appropriate use of restraint." This restraint is required to distribute forces evenly throughout the shoulder and avoid hinging at one weak point. "Do not hurry, this practice take time, the more you try to rush it, the more you will miss what it is actually about. Everything has its own time." says Guruji's daughter, Saraswati. David Gorman adds to this saying that we have a wonderful co-ordinating system that we need to trust. If we cannot go further without losing our wholeness and centred support ... we will get very good at straining, trying and chasing goals – not opening, finding balance and achieving them.

Two types of muscle fibres can be developed, "white fast-twitch fibres" and "red slow-twitch fibres", explains Gorman. The "white fast-twitch fibres" are extremely fast and powerful, but they fatigue relatively quickly (think sprinting). The "red slow-twitch fibres" are slower, less powerful but can operate almost indefinitely without tiring (think of being able to stay in a pose for a while without fatigue or the "shakes"). In Yoga, we may need power and strength from the white fast-twitch fibres, eg for Vinyasas. We will definitely need more non-fatiguing strength from the red slow-twitch fibres. These adaptations happen slowly and gradually. We must exercise patience to develop the kind of muscles that will support us effortlessly.



Ruth White and Mia Forbes Pirie demonstrate different stages of backbending

### Acceptance, discovery and backbending

Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga master and Anatomy expert, helps practitioners foster acceptance and patience by being aware of their natural limitations and when they should hold back. He cautions bone on bone compression which can occur when raising the arm as the humerus (upper arm bone) hits the acromion process. If bone on bone compression has occurred, we have reached our limit. When that happens, the coracoid process may be painful in *Chaturanga* (plank pose).

Grilley also explains how shoulders are very important in all backbends as the thoracic spine has only a small range of movement. It is important to open our shoulders safely in order to be able to back arch effectively.

When we talk of opening the chest, we are really increasing the range of movement of the shoulder blades towards each other, says Grilley. Gorman also explains that for a lot of people, the opening of the shoulders, and therefore the chest will "have a big effect on their breathing, not to mention the potential release of the abdominal muscles too". Ruth White, recommends opening the heart by using a specially made back-arch. This draws the shoulder blades together as well as releasing the muscles at the front of the body which restrict the shoulder.

For a thorough shoulder workout, focusing on flexibility and extension to open shoulders in a safe way, I suggest the following series which I have drawn together from a combination of Ruth White's teachings and recommendations from Suzie Shapaizer, a senior Karuna Yoga teacher.

### Simple stretch

Stand with your feet on the ground in such a way that you have an even distribution front to back and side to side and feel centred. Look straight ahead. Interlock your hands behind your back and pull them down away from your shoulders. Allow your chest to raise up toward the ceiling, opening your heart.

### Back-arch

Lie over a back-arch with pelvic muscles active, shoulders open and drawn down, the back and legs strongly pushing away from you. Feel fully supported by the arch and the ground beneath it. Allow the shoulders to roll back, the weight of the head helping to extend the spine. If there is any strain in your neck, place a cushion or a block underneath.

If you do not have a back-arch, Ruth White suggests lying on a bed with the shoulder blades on its edge, the head hanging back. If this is too much strain for your neck, interlock the fingers behind the head and cradle your head in your hands.



Ruth White demonstrates the targeted shoulder stretch.

### Shoulder stretches

Lie on your side with a block under your head. Stretch your lower arm out behind you as far and as high as you comfortably can. (See pic above). Use your upper arm for balance. To work on the supporting muscles, make sure you gently extend the arm behind you. Remain in the posture for 2 to 5 minutes and then turn and repeat on the other side for the same amount of time. If you feel your shoulder can comfortably stretch further, raise the top leg and place the foot on the ground behind the outstretched leg. Go carefully and take your time. Remember that Yoga is a lifelong practice and there is always tomorrow ...

### Helpful facts about the shoulder complex

David Gorman, Alexander Technique and Anatomy expert, explains how the shoulder is unique in several ways:

- It is a complex joint made up of three bones (scapula, clavicle and humerus) which need to co-ordinate to ensure our arm movements function with strength and safety.
- The arm has an amazing range of motion at the shoulder. Unlike the hip, its ligaments and connective tissues must be quite loose to allow that range.
- It is connected to the skeleton by one small joint, where the clavicle meets the sternum at the bottom of the neck.
- The nerves and blood vessels pass into and out of the arm through quite cramped quarters at the shoulder especially in some of the more extreme positions.

With such structural instability, protection is afforded by a huge number of muscles that cover most of the torso. Looking at a chart

### Stretch against a wall

Stand with the arms against a wall and walk the hands as high up the wall as you comfortably can. Sink your chest as you do so and look up to a point between your hands or just above. Extend the arms and shoulders as you do this to avoid collapsing your weight on to the weakest point in your shoulders.



Ruth White demonstrates the stretch. Mia demonstrates the correction.

### Preparation for arm raising and back-bending

Find a surface about hip height or use blocks to raise it to the right level. With your legs straight and strong and parallel to your support, rest your elbows on your support, hands in prayer position. Lengthen through your shoulders, moving your elbows forwards. Sink your chest deeply between your shoulders. Draw in the abdominal muscles and stretch back through the waist, extending the whole of your upper body.

of the muscles of the back, almost every muscle we see from the head to the sacrum relates to the arms. In the same way, the major muscles of the chest (with the exception of the abdominal muscles) are also arm muscles.

This has big implications for Yoga, since there are many asanas where the arm and shoulder are taken into extreme ranges or where the arm and shoulder need to bear substantial forces in support of movement. This cannot be done safely if the muscular network has been released (ie turned off by 'relaxation') and thus no longer is part of the web of support. Equally we cannot get the full range, nor get it with safety, if we are using excess muscular force.

*Next month we will explore how the shoulder is opened and strengthened in Ashanga Yoga, Iyengar-based traditions, and Yin Yoga. We will also examine how emotions are stored in the shoulders and how to release them.*

*Further details on page 39*

*My thanks go to all the generous and spirited teachers who have given up their time for the interviews which have made this series of articles possible: Aadil Palkhivala, Chuck Miller, David Gorman, Hamish Hendry, Kino MacGregor, Paul Grilley, Ruth White, and Sarah Powers. A special thank you to Ruth White for appearing in some of the pictures and to the late Sri K Pattabhi Jois who has been the greatest influence on my practice and life.*

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# yoga perspectives

## part 2 the shoulder

by Mia Forbes Pirie

Exploring the shoulder complex through different perspectives and Yoga traditions



Ruth White and Mia do a gentle shoulder and heart opening posture together

“Fear is always a lack of connection with self... If we are not connected to ourselves, it is difficult for us to be connected to others.”

### postures and emotions

Most of us who work hunched over desks - and some who do not - carry a disproportionate share of worries and tension in the shoulders. Tension held in the neck, shoulders and surrounding areas is frequently the source of headaches and migraines which can stop us in our tracks. Shoulders can hold us back in our Yoga practices and in our lives or help us to find balance and freedom. In Yoga, we take our shoulders to the mat and explore them in various ways, unravelling the time-impregnated emotions and vicissitudes of life. Changes made on the mat are also reflected in our day to day lives, helping us to become happier and more balanced people.

### emotional perspectives

“Shoulders reflect burden”, says teacher Aadil Palkivala. “They often become tight under the weight of emotions related to stress, tension, anxiety, sadness, and trepidation. Without exception, these are all emotions rooted in fear, which is a lack of connection with self – always. When we are connected with ourselves, the potential for fear does not exist, much less fear itself. Faith is the opposite of fear. When we feel fear, we must go inside ourselves and find the connection with ourselves by developing faith. Of course, this is not always easy! In order to achieve this faith we need to live our lives working from the spirit”.

Both Sarah Powers and Kino MacGregor explain that the body’s

fight or flight response affects the shoulders. Our lives can become so fraught that we end up living in a constant state of stress. Emotions such as anxiety, fear and worry also affect the digestive organs and kidneys. Messages relayed from the *vagus* nerve pass down to the major organs of the body, triggering the release of hormones such as adrenaline which in turn prompts the stress response. The body goes on high alert in the expectation of an imminent threat. As well as causing digestive problems, tension in our shoulders and headaches, this can also give rise to all kinds of issues including distancing ourselves from other people, resulting in a lack of intimacy. If we are not connected to ourselves, it is difficult for us to be connected to others.

Shoulders often round or hunch forwards protecting our vulnerable hearts, particularly when we feel sad. Ruth White, Iyengar-inspired teacher, explains that we can dissolve these emotions with love. Opening the heart centre can make all sorts of things happen, culminating in a warmth and natural sense of joy which flow through the body. Energy levels rise, and the thyroid gland, which is situated either side of the Adam’s Apple, is stimulated. Opening the heart can change attitude, and posture is very much about attitude.

Practised properly, Yoga helps to relieve tension, by opening and strengthening the shoulders. Three Yoga traditions achieve this in different ways.

## asana perspectives

In all styles of Yoga, any arm bearing posture will strengthen the shoulders. The shoulders are also strengthened and made more flexible each time the arms are stretched.

## ashtanga vinyasa yoga

The shoulder is constantly being moved and stretched in many different ways in the Ashtanga primary series. Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga opens the shoulder mainly through movement and the heat generated by the practice. Strength comes gradually. *Prasarita Padottanasana C*

which affect the shoulders, they are likely to progress much faster. Alex agreed that many people may incur stiffness in the shoulders and neck from all the Vinyasas. A way to prevent this is to keep the weight back in the heels and flex the feet to the maximum as one practises, for example, *Chaturanga Dandasana* (Plank pose).

Exhaling deeply can also help, as does keeping the head up and looking forward rather than down on the floor, which tends to collapse the shoulders further. The main purpose of the vinyasa is to move energy up and down the spine but, when people do not learn



Mia adjusting Bob Moy in *Prasarita Padottanasana C*



Mia in *Marichasana B*

(wide legged forward bend with hands clasped behind the back), says Kino MacGregor, Florida's leading Ashtanga teacher, is the most beneficial posture for working on the shoulders. This is the place where we begin developing the rotation inside the shoulders which will allow us to bind in postures like *Marichasana A* and *B* and ultimately *Suptakurmasana* (sleeping tortoise pose). It is an important posture to start to work on the rotation of the shoulder so that we begin to have the feeling of extending from the shoulder instead of rooting at the joint. Whenever we move, in terms of flexibility in the practice, we should think about lengthening and extending – so there is always space in the joint capsule and always space in the joint – and we never restrict our range of motion. Ultimately, we want flexibility to be an extension. Another helpful posture is *Parvottanasana*.

I suggested to teachers Hamish Hendry, Kino MacGregor and Alex Medin, (all leading Ashtanga teachers), that it may be difficult for people with very stiff shoulders to release tension without longer holds. Both Kino and Hamish emphasised that Sri K Pattabhi Jois taught that we can stay in any posture in the Ashtanga series as long as we want. If we want to work on certain areas, it may be advisable to spend longer in postures such as *Prasarita Padottanasana C*. Also, if people with stiff shoulders get help from a teacher in postures

to exhale properly in the postures – probably 95% of all people – that last centring energy of the exhale is never really consolidated. Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga expert, agrees with Hamish Hendry that the shoulder is not the kind of joint which generally needs a Yin practice to open it. Sarah Powers, however, suggests that when healing a shoulder injury, or where there is significant stiffness in the shoulder, certain Yin postures can help, especially injured shoulders. The time taken to complete the poses prevents 're-straining' and stimulates healing in the area, breaking up scar tissues as well as releasing tension.

## Iyengar-based yoga

Teacher Ruth White, suggests that we should always start a session by opening and widening the chest using a simple standing stretch with the hands clasped behind the back and/or backarching (as explained in last month's edition of Y&H magazine).

There are two main Iyengar postures which focus on the shoulders: *Garudasana* (Eagle pose) and *Gomukasana* (cow pose). The full pose and a modification are demonstrated below. The same postures as in the Ashtanga Vinyasa primary series are also helpful (*Prasarita Padottanasana C* and *Parsvottanasana*).

## Yin Yoga

The traditional Downward Dog posture (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*)

requires open shoulders and can reveal whether people know how to use their shoulders, suggest both Aadil Palkivala (Iyengar) and Kino MacGregor (Ashtanga). Paul Grilley (Yin Yoga) explains that the posture can be adapted to help open the shoulder. In order to perform this modification, which Paul calls the 'Long Dog', simply move the feet backwards, further away from the hands. This puts more pressure on the arms, requiring more strength and also more flexibility in the shoulders, chest, torso and arms. You may want to practise this with your feet against a wall to avoid slipping.

Yin Yoga does not, however, focus significantly on the shoulders and few poses can be found in Yin Yoga books or DVDs. Sarah Powers, Yin and Insight Yoga expert, explains that this is because the yin part of the body is below the navel where energy tends to be more stagnant. We tend to use our upper bodies more than our lower bodies throughout the day. Just in talking

*Mia (left) demonstrates Gomukasana arm modification with a belt. Ruth White (right) demonstrates the full posture*



*Mia demonstrates Downward Dog*



*Ruth White demonstrates Parsvottasana, Mia demonstrates the correction, squeezing the hands closer together and easing the thoracic spine forwards to open the heart whilst gently levering the arms at the side to give a stronger stretch.*



*Mia Demonstrates how to get into Wide-kneed child's pose with twist – using one arm for stability whilst slipping the other arm underneath (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)*



*Mia demonstrates Lying Spinal Twist pose (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series). Use a block under the knee if you are not comfortable as Yin postures are held for a long time.*

*Mia demonstrates opening the heart through backarching*



and carrying out everyday activities, such as cooking, we move our arms, so there is naturally more circulation. Most of the poses in the yin sequences will target areas between the navel and the knees for that reason and also because many of the poses are geared to help one have a more comfortable sitting posture for meditation which is the purpose of Yoga asanas, as described in the yogic texts.

Sarah has, however, developed a yin series which specifically targets the shoulder. This can be found in her book, 'Insight Yoga'. It includes postures such as quarter Dog pose, wide-kneed Child's pose with twist, laying Spinal Twist with one arm up, Snail pose, Fish pose and Seal pose. These postures are tremendously recuperative after a long stressful day working at a desk and also very healing for shoulder injuries. In fact, Sarah used the series to help heal her own shoulder when it was injured and still uses it if the old injury flares up.

*Further details on page 39*



*Mia Demonstrates Wide-kneed Child's pose with Twist (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)*



*Mia demonstrates Snail Pose (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)*

## Mia and Nina's life questions

Mia and Nina Grunfeld (owner of 'Life Clubs' and author of numerous books as well as the Telegraph's 'Get a Life' series) have come up with a short series of questions to help you through the emotional and off-the-mat issues, which may be preventing the opening and strengthening of your shoulders.

- What are the burdens on you and your shoulders? (worries, pressures, other people's opinions, intrusions, your own negative thoughts?) How would addressing each burden contribute to your well-being?
- When was the last time that you felt that your shoulders were really released and relaxed? What caused them to relax? How could you achieve that again? What would be the first step? If you cannot bring that to mind, visualise an imaginary or real 'safe space' in which you are completely protected from the

outside world. Mentally go to that safe space and feel how your shoulders and heart feel when you are there. Bring that to mind whenever you need it in your own life.

- Are your responsibilities your own or are you burdening yourself with responsibilities and worries which do not really belong to you? Write a list of worries – along the lines of those you thought of for the first question. Divide it into 3 columns (1) those that will go away eventually given time; (2) those that are not your problem; (3) those that are your problem and that you can do something about. Cross out columns 1 and 2, they are not your concern. Look at column 3. If there are things you cannot do something about now but could do something about in the future, write them in your diary. Take a look at those left. Assess how important they really are to your wellbeing. Make a plan of action to tackle the ones that really matter.

# yoga perspectives

## part 3 the knee

by Mia Forbes Pirie

Exploring the knee through different perspectives and Yoga traditions



Mia sitting with ancient Buddha statues in Siddhasana

### the knee

Everyone wants to be flexible: to be able to sit in full lotus, to put their leg behind their head and perform deep backbends. Naturally flexible people speak of the difficulty in building strength. In moments of envy, it is easy to forget that part of the equation. But Yoga is not practised from the outside and the more we force to achieve a posture, the more injuries come our way to remind us what Yoga is really about.

Injuries to the knee are common in Yoga and are generally linked with straining to achieve something the body is not quite ready for. This can be a painful discovery, on both a physical and emotional level. On a physical level, the knee is delicately balanced and intricately linked to everything above and below it. Once injured, pain can be recurring and knees can take a long time to heal. On an emotional level, it is always difficult to look head on at how our pride and desire can result in us doing harm to ourselves.

### common knee problems

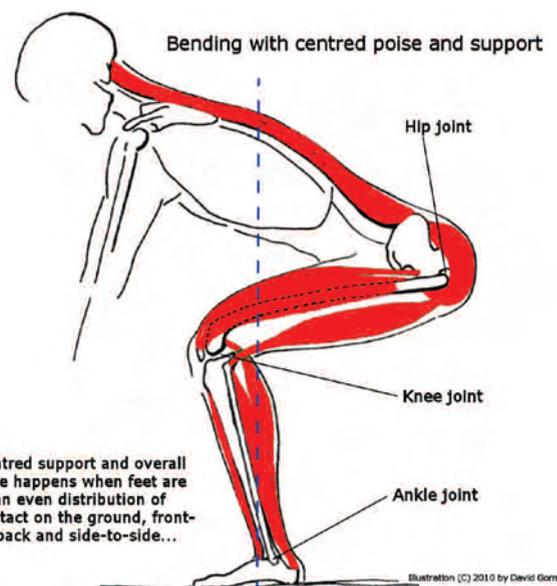


Illustration (C) 2010 by David Gorman

Bending correctly is important to avoid putting excess pressure on the knees.  
Picture by David Gorman.

The most important thing to know about the anatomy of the knee is very simple: that it is located between the feet and the hips. Straining to overcome tight hips is the most common way to injure knees in Yoga. Most knee problems stem from stiffness of the hip: the knee being the smaller, weaker joint takes the flack for the larger stronger joint above it. As Kino MacGregor (*Ashtanga Yoga*) explains, the hip joint is deeper, more stable and harder to move than the knee joint. Most of the teachers I interviewed agreed that injury to the knees generally comes from torque and twisting motions. It is rare for a knee to be injured when the leg is straight. Injuries generally occur when the leg is twisted and the stronger, tighter hips will not rotate. The knee joint suffers as a result.

Other common damage situations for knees are forces from the side, hyperextension and too much pressure being put on the knee in crouching postures. When the knee experiences forces from the side, pushing it inwards or outwards, this can damage the ligaments (generally those on the side of the knee). This can happen, for example, due to fallen arches. Hyperextension occurs when the knees are forced back past their normal range. When the knees are bent while standing and the weight is behind the knees, this can create disproportionate levels of pressure.

### how to avoid damage *steady balanced postures*

The 'Yoga Sutras' of Patanjali state that postures should be steady, balanced and comfortable. Many years ago, when Sri K Pattabhi Jois (*Ashtanga Yoga's* founding father) was still alive and teaching, some of his students were extolling the virtues of a highly flexible Yoga teacher. Gurujii turned to them and said that it was true that this person was flexible, but 'Tim steady'. He was referring to the incredible Tim Miller who, although not born flexible, is strong and steadfast in his postures and in his practice, reminding these students that flexibility is not the only important thing in Yoga. Strength is also an important factor. Nowhere is the cultivation of the steadiness, balance and comfort described in that Sutra more important than in protecting the knee.

Understanding how central this maxim is to our Yoga practice, Yogamasti has placed the Sanskrit version, 'Sukham Sthiram Asanam', on the outfit that I have chosen to wear in the photographs for this article.

One of the fundamental elements of David Gorman's (*Alexander Technique and Learning Methods*) teachings is to aim for a centred and poised support which minimises the forces on the joints and muscular effort involved. In standing, this means that there would be a relatively even distribution of contact of each foot with the floor. Much lip service is paid to this in Yoga classes, but its importance and how to go about it is often underestimated or misunderstood. Postures grow from the roots. An even distribution creates not only a firm foundation but also a basis for balance and ease of movement throughout the body. Chuck Miller suggests that this may be the best way to start to tap into the energy of *Mulha bandha* (the root lock) without doing violence to the body. Kino MacGregor cautions that people often do not put enough pressure into the big toe.

When awareness is brought to our balance (in sitting or in standing), we begin to learn to trust our bodies, progressing at our own pace and preventing overstraining or overstretching. As Gorman says, you will only be able to use your body well when strain and effort as well as poise and support are experiences, not merely a theory. People need to avoid forcing and the resultant tightness which will make them less flexible and put more pressure on their joints.

Never strain the knee to get into a posture which may be impeded by stiff hips. The only strain (as opposed to a gentle stretch) that should be felt in the knee, says Paul Grilley (*Yin Yoga*), is that felt when trying to kneel, ie the general tension along the front part of the

*Top: Headstand: Steady balanced posture*

*Centre: Kneeling in Child's Pose*

*Bottom: Healing and protection: Strengthen the quadriceps group of muscles to protect the knee. This was recommended to me by Paratroopers many years ago – and also has Ruth White's seal of approval!*





knee whilst gently stretching the joint capsules and tendons.

Much is made of ‘achieving’ the Lotus posture in Yoga (*Padmasana*) and many injuries are sustained in trying to achieve it. Although the Buddha is sometimes depicted in Lotus, he is more frequently represented in the far more accessible (and less damaging to the knees) *Siddhasana* (Adept pose). When people try to push themselves into a Yoga posture, counsels Chuck Miller, they are identifying with the external shape thereby increasing their weaknesses and relying on mere strength. People need to understand what it means to challenge themselves in a new way, including taking care of themselves. Ruth White explains that our pride often gets in the way.

Perhaps the best way to avoid knee injuries, advises Kino MacGregor, is to exercise patience and await the opening in terms of alignment principles which focus on the hip joint rather than rotation to the knee.

Many practitioners start their Yoga practices with no kinaesthetic feeling of their hip joint. As this begins to develop, practitioners will be able to become aware of the rotation of the hip joint within the hip socket. When this is experienced, the real journey begins. Working in this patient, listening way, will help to prevent many knee injuries. David Gorman advises that people need to be sufficiently aware to know when they are straining.

Developing this inner awareness is more important than trying to achieve the ideal shape. As Aadil Palkhivala says, “Don’t perform, explore”.

#### Avoiding hyperextension – ‘learning to find zero’

Imagine a line down the side of your leg running from your hip joint to your ankle. If the centre of your knee lies behind that line, it is hyper-extended. When people try to push themselves into a shape, they are not finding balance, explains Chuck Miller. They need to understand and find zero, as well as developing the strength to hold themselves back. It can be hard to find the motivation to do this.

Both Ruth White and Kino MacGregor have, in the past, had to contend with a tendency to hyper-extend. Ruth White explains that it is really a ‘collapse’ which can lead to a ‘baker’s cyst’ at the back of the knee. This is where fluid collects in the back of the knee forming a small bulge. When the baker’s cyst bursts, fluid can flow down to the ankle causing extreme pain and discomfort. When this occurs, there is little which can be done to heal it apart from just waiting. Ruth also explains that when we are sitting or inverted, hyperextension is less damaging (although it should still be avoided) since the weight of the body is not bearing down on the knee. Pressing down into the ground helps to keep the leg muscles activated and protects against hyperextension.

If knee issues are hip related, the best course of action is to find safe ways of opening them. Aadil Palkhivala recommends his hip series which safely opens the hip joint in its full range of movement. To redress knee injuries straight leg lifts can be helpful.

Remember, if you don’t go within, you go without. Practise with kindness and put the safety of your knees above any kind of acrobatics or pride.

#### Tips on how to keep your knees safe.

Healing and protection: Strengthen the quadriceps group of muscles to protect the knee. This was recommended to me by paratroopers many years ago – and also has Ruth White’s seal of approval!

*More tips on taking care of the knees will be published in next month’s Yoga Perspectives series.*

*Top: Warrior II: Steady balanced safe hip-opening posture – knee aligned with second toe – use standing poses to safely open the hips – make sure the knee is aligned with the second toe.*

*Circular picture: Make sure the knee is aligned with the second toe.*

*Centre: Half-lotus or Siddhasana are both stable, balanced sitting postures. Do not push yourself into full or half-lotus to the detriment of your knees. Listen to your body!*

*Bottom: Odd as it may seem – it can be more comfortable to go into full-lotus upside down! There is less pressure on the knees! Nonetheless – never force into this posture!*



## part 4 nurturing the knee

Exploring the knee through different perspectives and Yoga traditions by Mia Forbes Pirie

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*“Love provides the bridge between the body and the spirit” says Maharaj, author of the modern spiritual classic I AM THAT.*

How, you may ask, is that relevant to knee injuries? It can become frustrating when the body will not do what the mind wants it to. Sometimes, people take that frustration out on their bodies – pushing and straining to achieve a posture, which often results in injuries or undesirable tension. More often, people’s intention is to help the body: thinking they are doing something ‘good’ by trying to direct their bodies with their minds. Unfortunately this generally results in unwanted tension. It can be hard to un-learn habits which have developed over a lifetime, and yet that is one of the reasons why many people practise Yoga.

In Yoga, the process is key. There will always be more postures and ‘achievements’ can often be short-lived. The only real achievement in Yoga is coming home to ourselves. As Aadil Palkhivala (Purna, Iyengar-asana Yoga) told me, “Postures should bring you closer to the spirit, not feed the ego.” He also emphasised the importance of developing intuition and said that “injuries are generally a reminder that you are not in tune with the spirit. Injuries occur by definition because of lack of connection with the spirit but, practically because of lack of awareness.”

Hamish Hendry (Ashtanga Yoga) also underlines the importance of awareness and moving the knee and foot in the correct way (as shown in the June issue of Y&H) – not pulling too hard, not trying to make it do anything it does not want to do. In other words, not rushing!

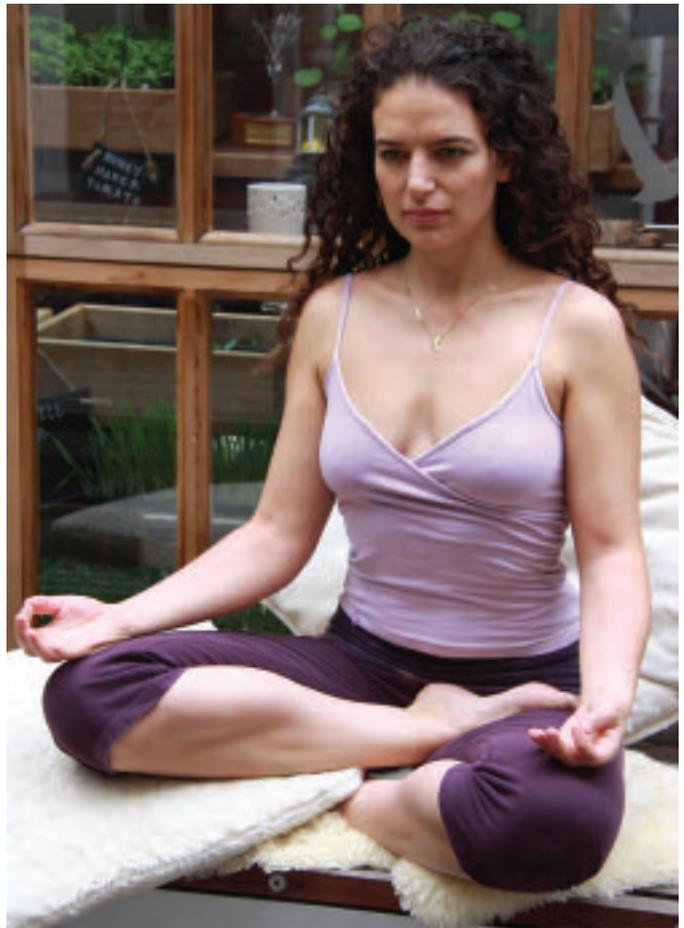
Love is the link between the body and the spirit and Yoga is intended to develop that loving link. If your practice takes you away from this connection, it is time to rethink.

#### A Question of Effort

Injuries are always an opportunity to get to know ourselves better. They, as well as injury prevention, are an opening to bring more love, awareness and connection into our practices. The best way to do that is moment by moment, focussing on the process of practice, not the external fruits of a given posture.

The importance of process is beautifully explained by David Gorman: People think they are doing this ‘efforting’ (eg pulling forwards in a forward bend to get a stronger stretch in the hamstrings which may involve tightening the shoulders) to get further, to a better place. Generally, they have no real awareness of the means they use: effort and strain whereas the opposite is their goal.

“Practice doesn’t make perfect – it makes permanent”, says Gorman, “you get good at what you practise. If you tighten and strain to get somewhere, you are, in fact, shortening and pressuring yourself, even if your intent is to lengthen and open yourself. The system responds to what you are actually doing, not what you think you are trying to achieve. People working in this way are working against themselves – they think they are constantly lengthening when, in fact, they are constantly shortening. They are not aware of the means they are using, not aware of the process. They want freedom and wholeness, but do not use that as their moment-to-moment process and then wonder why they never seem to get there. The system focuses on a person’s intention and what they do.” Having a clear intention, listening to the body and trusting the body to achieve that intention will bring far greater results, in terms of opening and increased range, but also in terms of self-love and growing the spirit instead of the ego.



*Full or half lotus may not be appropriate or necessary for you now. Take your time. Gently supporting the knee protects it and allows the leg and hip muscles to relax further.*

### **an obsession with lotus?**

The Lotus posture is a beautiful and balanced posture. Some say that it is also a strongly energetically cleansing posture. That may be true. To some degree, that is the whole purpose of the posture and most Yoga postures. As Ruth White says, people can be a little proud in the West, wanting to get into Lotus and advanced sitting postures, which people in the East are brought up doing. Our ligaments develop differently over the years and due to different lifestyles. What is possible is different for each person - forcing to get into the posture can be very damaging to the knees, as well as the spirit.

According to Paul Grilley (Yin Yoga), sometimes physical factors, such as bone on bone interaction prevent people from doing postures such as the Lotus fully. It is important for people to know what they can – and cannot – change, otherwise they misdirect their effort. Recognising a physical restriction can be more of an emotional and mental process. Paul has seen people struggle to defy what, to him is obviously a physical limitation because they equate physical limitation to some sort of spiritual deficit. The idea that a spiritual problem is limiting the body can be a huge burden to carry. If and when people come to accept spirituality is not linked to range of motion, that is a great emotional and mental release to them.

Grilley suggests asking the following questions, which may help to foster acceptance and contribute to greater awareness and physical development, far more than straining to achieve a posture:

- Even if you believe your practice would change your body enough to do a pose such as Lotus, what do you think is going to happen when you do that pose?
- Even if your bones change and you can do Lotus - what do you think you have achieved?

## ahimsa

One of the 5 yamas of Yoga is Ahimsa: non-violence. A yama can be described as a restraint and restraint is important in Yoga if people are going to avoid injuring themselves.

The word 'restraint' may evoke the idea of an action. That kind of restraining can, in itself be a form of violence towards the body. It is a delicate balance. In fact, we need to learn to restrain our excesses in order to get closer to our true nature and balance.

Chuck Miller believes that ahimsa or non-violence should be primary in our practices. "The reduction of violence is not only a humane thing to do in terms of being a kinder person to yourself which helps you then learn to be kinder to others but, the process of attempting to continuously reduce violence and reduce aggression also has a simple effect on the mind of developing greater consciousness and developing a greater ability to focus and be concentrated." That consciousness and focus is what allows us to progress both in our practices and in our lives.



Aadil Palkhivala recommends gently but firmly "pumping" the knee with the hand on the thigh to prevent and heal injury (as well as safely opening the hip). Start slowly and build up but STOP if you feel ANY pain.

## Knee facts from David Gorman, Alexander Technique and Anatomy expert, explains why the knee is so vulnerable:

1. The knee is located between 2 long bone segments (upper and lower leg) and, hence between the motions and momentum of your heavy torso and the immovable ground. This means that the forces that can be focused on the knee through movement and postures are huge.
2. The knee is also a very complex joint, in fact almost 2 joints in one, with the 2 'knuckles' of the bottom of the femur meeting the 2 upper surfaces of the tibia. It has a pair of loosely-attached cartilage menisci, many internal and external ligaments and a complicated joint capsule, all of which are vulnerable to damage from excess strains in just about any direction
3. It is a remarkably open joint in terms of range of the bones, so it is important to remember that the ligaments are not there to restrict you and get in the way of your Yoga ambitions, but to protect the knee from damage and to serve your movements by guiding its ranges of motion
4. Damage to the knee is not only the result of excess forces in any one moment but also occurs because of accumulated smaller, less extreme forces applied repeatedly. Once damaged, the knee can take a long time to heal, largely because we use the knee so much, even in all our daily activities. It's hard to give it real time off.

## some tips on the knee

Last month we described hyperextension and the injuries it can cause. This month, we show the knee hyperextended. Try taking a look in the mirror to see what you do in a forward bend.



Kino MacGregor demonstrates a hyperextended knee

Kino MacGregor demonstrates a straight leg

## Mia and David's life questions

Mia and David Gorman (developer of 'LearningMethods' and author of 'The Body Moveable') have come up with a short series of questions to help you through the emotional and off-the-mat issues, which may be leading to your pushing yourself too hard and injuring your knees.

- 1 Who do you want to be? Yourself or someone else? Name 3 things you could do to stop fighting with yourself and get closer to who you really are. Start doing 1 of those things today. List 5 things that you like about yourself just the way you are. If you cannot find 5 things – look for things other people like about you. They do not need to be absolutes and can be as simple as being a good listener, getting up in the morning to do your practice, loving your children, the colour of your hair.
- 2 "You are what you repeatedly do" – examine the way that you practise. Be honest. How loving are you? How much do you strain to achieve? Are you willing to let go of at least a little of that and be more loving towards yourself? Name 1 thing that you could do to make your practice more loving. Write it on a small piece of paper and put it in your Yoga bag or wallet. Put it next to your mat next time you practise, as a reminder.
- 3 Examine your life and your relationships with other people, yourself and with the things that you do. How loving are you? Do you enjoy the process or are you solely focussed on the goal? Name 1 thing you can do to bring more love into your life. Name 1 thing you can do to enjoy the process more. Start today.

Contact details on page 41

# the hips

Exploring the hips through different perspectives and Yoga traditions

Mia (left) and Ruth White (right) opening the hip in Pigeon pose

Many people are born with wide open hips and a great range of flexibility. Few of those who spend their lives sitting in chairs manage to retain this. Over time, the muscles and ligaments around the hip joint tighten and the range of motion is, at least temporarily, lost. Part of Yoga's purpose is to restore these hips to their full potential, allowing yogi/nis to sit comfortably in meditation.

Most forms of physical Yoga place a strong emphasis on the hips with postures focusing on opening, stretching and aligning this area. How people sit at their desks or watching television is, however, as important as what they do on their mats. Kino MacGregor, Ashtanga Yoga expert, recommends that if people want to commit to changing their hips, they should use them differently in their everyday lives. For

example, sitting on the floor more often or sitting cross-legged in a chair. Rather than only working on the hips for an hour or so in a Yoga class, making changes in daily activities can gently restore the hip joint in a long-lasting way. As Kino says, "If we start making changes in our everyday lives, that is when Yoga can be truly transformative".

#### Movements of the hips

"The hip joint is so large, there are so many things that affect it", says Hamish Hendry, a leading Ashtanga instructor in the UK, "every time you move your hip in Yoga it is opening in some way". People are often surprised to learn that the hips move in 6 different directions each of which can be worked on through Yoga. It is no wonder that it is sometimes difficult to figure out where the blockages are, let alone working through them!



Below: The ligaments of the hip joint are spiralled around the joint in normal upright position. When the leg bends forward (hip flexion) these ligaments unwind and so loosen the joint allowing for a high degree of forward flexion. On the other hand they are already relatively tight in standing, so when the leg goes back at the hip (hip extension) they spiral around the joint and tighten up even more, making the range of hip extension very small compared to flexion.

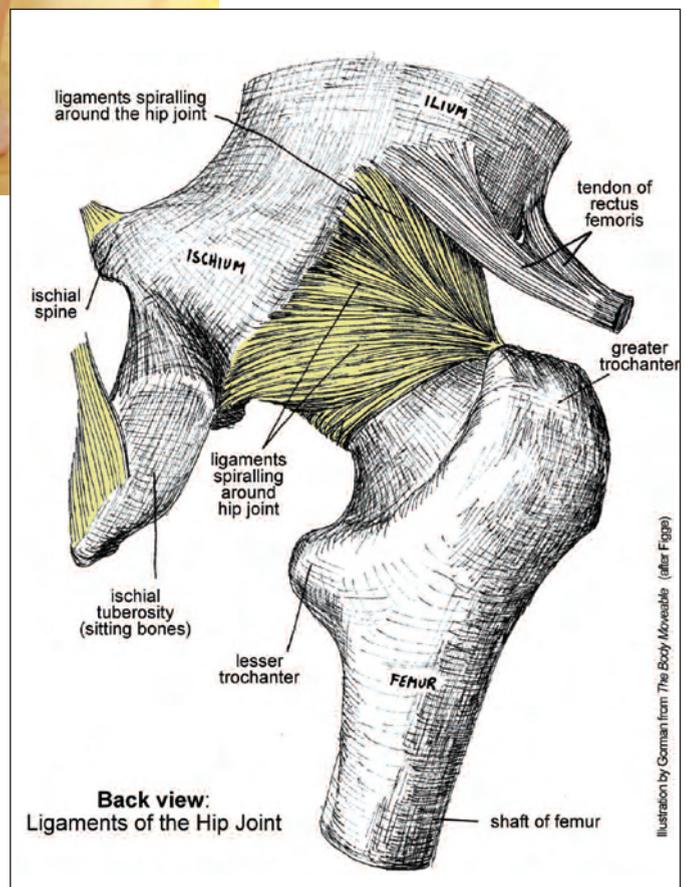
Mia (left) and Ruth White (right) demonstrate flexion of the hips with straight legs.

The hips are a phenomenal and complex joint stabilised by the joint capsule, connective tissues and 19 muscles surrounding the joint. They move, flex or rotate in the following directions:

- 1 Outwards, to the side (lateral or external rotation);
- 2 Inwards, towards the centre, (medial or internal rotation);
- 3 Backwards (extension or retroversion);
- 4 Towards the torso (flexion or anteversion);
- 5 Out to the side, away from the body (abduction); and
- 6 Inwards, towards the body (adduction).

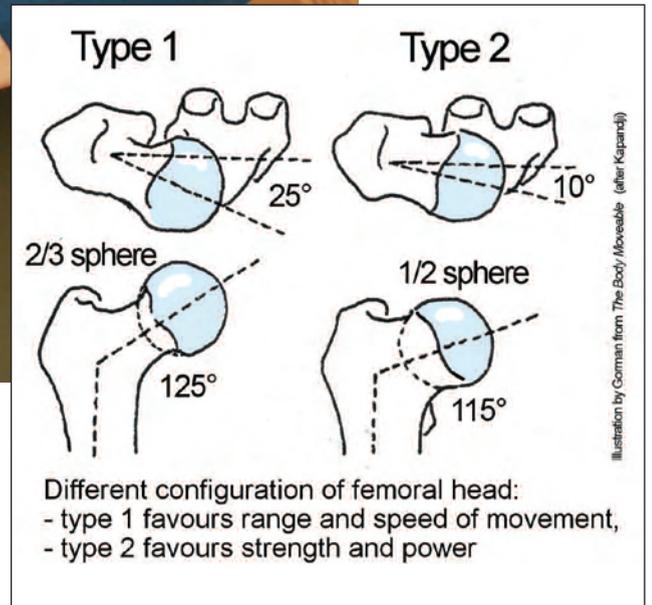
Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga and Anatomy expert, describes these movement beautifully in his anatomy DVD.

Aadil Palkhivala, Purna (Iyengar posture based) Yoga master, has developed a hip series designed to work on all of these directions. It will be published in his next book.





Mia demonstrates inward rotation, whilst Ruth demonstrates outwards rotation.



Ruth White demonstrates stretching the hip flexors over a back-arch (available from Ruth White)



Ruth White demonstrates the gentler variation.



Ruth White and Mia demonstrate how a gentler stretch to the hip flexors can be achieved with another person.

**Limitations from the bones: Inward and outward rotation - different tribes?**

Currently, the range of motion in our hips can be limited by our bones. Paul Grilley explains this in detail in his DVDs and generally divides people into one of two tribes: those who, because of their bones, find inward rotation easier and those with easier outward rotation. Paul's own teacher, Paulie Zink (founder of Yin Yoga) believes that with proper effort over long periods of time, people can 're-grow their bones'. Paul Grilley asserts that in the moment this does not matter and that it is helpful to people to be aware of the limitations of their bones.

Some people may naturally have bones with greater capacity for outer rotation than others. David Gorman's images demonstrate how the shape of the bones which make up the hip joint favour different attributes.

To be continued ...

For more information [www.SustainYourself.co.uk](http://www.SustainYourself.co.uk).



Ruth White (right) and Mia (left) demonstrate Warrior 1 posture. Warriors 1 and 2 gently open the hips – they are both Iyengar postures and part of the Ashtanga Vinyasa Primary Series

# yoga perspectives

by Mia Forbes Pirie

## the hips part 2

Exploring the hips through different perspectives and Yoga traditions

**“Mr Duffy lived a short distance from his body”. James Joyce’s description of one of the central characters in his collection of short stories, ‘The Dubliners’, is telling of our society. The purpose of Yoga is to get back into our bodies, feeling comfortable, grounded and stable, able to sit in meditation for extended periods. Hips are central to this. They act as the roots of our connection to the Earth. Open hips are also what allow people to sit comfortably in meditation, which is why most forms of Yoga focus heavily on flexibility in this area.**

Nowadays, the habit of sitting in chairs tends to promote stiff hip joints. Ashtanga Vinyasa, Iyengar and Yin Yoga each approach hip opening in a different way – although often through the same postures. When most people think of hip opening postures, they tend to think of postures with strong external rotation like Lotus or *Baddhakonasana*. Arguably, this is missing a big part of the picture. Lotus, for example, is more of a hip open posture than a hip opener. It is the more subtle postures, like Warrior 1 and 2, Upward Dog, Triangle (*Trikonasana*) and even Tree posture (*Vrksasana*) which can be used to start opening the hips, building up towards more challenging postures.

The Ashtanga primary series stretches and opens the hips in all directions. Iyengar Yoga focuses on precise alignment using props where necessary which, used appropriately, further assist the hips in relaxing, releasing and opening. It also allows the practitioner a

greater selection of postures than the Ashtanga Primary Series alone. Yin postures are held longer and target the deep connective tissue working gently to stretch and re-align. Yin offers a greater selection and versatility in practice, enabling a greater focus on an individual’s specific areas of tightness.

### the mala of ashtanga vinyasa yoga

It is no coincidence that Sri K Pattabhi Jois, known fondly as Guruji, called his book ‘Yoga Mala’. A *mala* is an unending string of beads, each linked to the next by a fine thread, each having a spiritual purpose of centring and bringing the person holding it closer to the peace that resides within. In the same way, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga practice consists of a string of postures, each building on the previous one, each one linked to the next by a fine strand of breath, and I believe that Guruji would have said, each one bringing the practitioner slightly closer to God.

On the physical plane, the preparation of each posture for the one that follows is nowhere more apparent than with the hip. The opening of the hip joint occurs in stages. Beginning with standing postures, students are taught to create gentle movement in the hip area through *Surya Namaskara* repetitions: forward bends stretch the hamstrings; Downward Dog, the hamstrings and calves; and Upward Dog, the hip flexors and quadriceps. Warrior poses which come into play in the second set of Sun salutations, *Surya Namaskar B*, gently stretch the hip flexors, but a little more than just Upward Dog. *Trikonasana A & B*, *Parsvakonasana A & B* and *Parsvottanasana* use outward rotation to prepare the practitioner for seated postures which

challenge this movement in the hip joint even further. The Warrior posture which comes into play first in the second set of Sun salutations, *Surya Namaskar B*, and then later held for 5 breaths, gently stretches the hip flexors.

Moving into the seated postures, the Ashtanga Yoga method gives students *Janusirsana*, one of the gentlest sitting postures, to focus mainly on outward rotation. Then, in *Marichasana*, students focus on developing dynamic control over their hips joints by focusing on flexion (A), then on flexion on one side, and extension and rotation on the other (B), and finally internal rotation, flexion and external rotation during a twist (D) which builds up towards the pinnacle of *Supta Kurmasana*.

tethered together. The focus of Yin centres on the connective tissue in this area, allowing the Chi, Energy or Prana to flow freely through the meridians.

Sarah Powers explains the 3 main features that help affect the yin tissues (connective tissues) the best. The first is to come into a pose with an appropriate amount of intensity, ie finding one's appropriate 'edge'. The second is to become still when you've reached that edge and to relax engaging the muscles even while stretching them. The third is remaining in the pose for some time.

Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga and anatomy expert, says that there is no standardised ideal way to do a yin posture. It all depends on the individual and their bone structure. It is important to be clear about



The Primary series does not include some of the other beneficial postures which can be practised in Iyengar and Yin Yoga. These are considered more advanced and appear in later series.

Ashtanga postures are traditionally held for 5 breaths, although both Kino MacGregor and Hamish Hendry emphasise that any Ashtanga Vinyasa posture can be held for as long as the practitioner wishes.

### Yin yoga

As well as Yoga being designed to enable a comfortable seated meditation, Sarah Powers, Yin Yoga expert, explains that most of the Yin poses focus on the hips because the yin part of the body is below the navel. Due to the gravitational pull, energy tends to become more stagnant here. The upper body is moved around considerably in everyday life, but the lower body is often less active. The lower body's main joint site, the hips, has many bones and many ligaments all

what the primary objective of a pose is. For example, if your intention is to stretch the hip, the hand and head positions will be optional and will change during the time the posture is held.

There are only 2 ways to do a posture 'wrongly' in a Yin practice, explains Grilley: 1) Do it so aggressively that you hurt yourself; and 2) Do it in such a way that you have no effective stress or traction in the desired area. "You're not going to hurt yourself, but you're wasting your time!" He emphasises that an active, living, breathing yin practice looks different for each individual.

Yin postures are generally held for 4 or 5 minutes or more – unless they are asymmetrical. Generally, postures are held longer if working the fascia and ligaments and for less time if working the muscles. "Muscles are more apt to be stretched in a Yang way" says Paul Grilley, "Yin is about plying the joints more than working the

muscles." Yin can be an invaluable way of loosening tightly bound ligaments around the hip joint area.

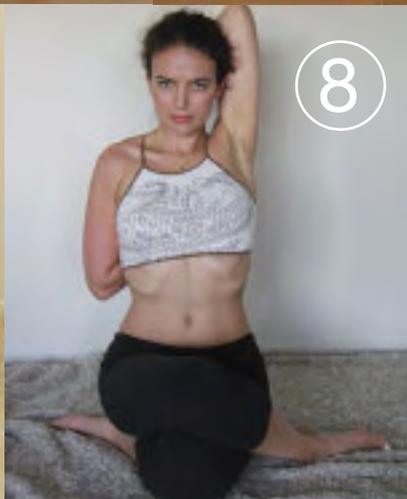
### Iyengar yoga

Although Iyengar Yoga uses the same posture as Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, the practice method differs. Iyengar focuses on alignment. The postures tend to be held for longer, they are practised in a different order, props can be used to support the practitioner, and more postures and variations of postures are available.

Working within one's limits, Iyengar students may practise other postures which in the Ashtanga Vinyasa method are reserved for more advanced practitioners only. For example, *Gomukhasana* (Cowhead posture), in the Ashtanga series, is part of the Intermediate

postures and Iyengis around 20. The longer times spent in postures and the additional support of props and focus on alignment combine to allow the practitioner to settle into the posture and work gently with his or her own body, allowing more time for the muscles and ligaments to re-align.

These 3 traditions offer different perspectives on how to open the hips. Although different, they each have something rich to offer. The methods are complimentary. They can be used on their own, they can be used in parallel, or inspiration can be drawn from each of them and brought into the primary system the practitioner chooses. Together or separately, they enable the practitioner to achieve optimum hip flexibility and a comfortable seated posture.



- 1 *Janusirsana A*, one of the gentlest sitting postures focussing on outward rotation – Photo: Bob Moy.
- 2 *Marichasana B*, External rotation in half Lotus on one side and good preparation for *Suptakurmasana* – Photo: Bob Moy
- 3/4 *Kino MacGregor* demonstrates a comfortable *Kurusasana* (preparation for *Suptakurmasana*) and *Suptakurmasana* – the most challenging postures in the Ashtanga Vinyasa Primary series, and can be “a lifetime of practice for most practitioners”.
- 5 *Bob Moy* and *Mia* in different versions of *Twisting Dragon* pose. *Paul Grilley* explains how the posture can be practised in a number of ways: start with the right knee forward, left hand or forearm to the floor, right hand resting on or cupping right knee, twisting towards right side. How you hold the right hand is optional and variable as is the position of the head and neck. The focus is on the hips – but how you roll your pelvis is up to your individual discretion – just make sure you feel a stretch. – Photo: Jen Standish.
- 6/7 *Bob Moy* and *Mia* demonstrate different versions of *Yin Swan Posture* (similar to *Pigeon* pose) with different levels of difficulty. Raising the back leg is optional, as are the position of the pelvis and the hands. *Paul Grilley* explains that what is important is not where the pelvis ‘should’ be – but where to feel the stretch. This should be in the lateral portion of the ilial sacral joint, over the bony portion of the pelvis and down the lateral part of the thigh. Physiologically, this is the IT band and, energetically, the gall bladder channel. It has a huge influence over the sciatic nerve, the largest in the body. – Photos: Jen Standish
- 8 *Mia* demonstrates *Gomukhasana* (Cow posture) in Ashtanga and Iyengar and *Shoelace* pose in Yin Yoga. This is available to all, with modifications as needed in Iyengar and Yin Yoga. It is a second series posture in Ashtanga, available only to more advanced practitioners. Photo: Bob Moy.

(or Second). This is made possible by allowing and encouraging the use of props which make advanced postures more accessible.

Props also help the body to become fully aligned. For example, in *Marichasana B*, the Iyengar method does not favour binding until the body is able to bind fully aligned without straining unduly any part. The Ashtanga Vinyasa method, in contrast, traditionally favours binding, using the bind as leverage to open further and align.

Ideally, Iyengar postures are also practised in an order which will foster progressive hip opening, although this will depend on the objectives of the teacher or practitioner. Other postures, including *Tree* pose (*Vrksasana*) can be used gently to warm up and open the hips.

Iyengar postures are generally held for 2 to 3 minutes which is longer than the typical 5 breaths for Ashtangis. In an hour and a half to two hour session, Ashtangis will generally practise around 50

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“Love is the only form of strength  
which has no limits.”

Kino MacGregor

# yoga perspectives

how fast does yoga go?

by Mia Forbes Pirie

*Infinite patience brings immediate results” Wayne Dyer.*

**Over and over, this phrase has changed my life and my practice. It sometimes slips my mind but I am always grateful when I remember it.**

Modern society often seems to be in a hurry. Although most of life is made up by moments of journey, the goal is typically the focus and many of us make a habit of striving towards it. In Yoga, as in the rest of life, that striving is typically counterproductive in the longer term: it results in less achievement than the alternative of being present. Nevertheless people become addicted to constant movement, trying and busy-ness. Habits are hard to break.

The path of Yoga is the path of changing habits and patterns. Patience is a cornerstone, not a mere virtue. Kino MacGregor, Ashtanga Yoga expert, explains that in order to develop a new habit to the point where it happens naturally and effortlessly, a person needs to repeat an action a minimum of 1,000 times. The average is closer to 10,000. Kino tells her students these statistics not to discourage them but to help them understand the importance of patience, perseverance, and a good mental attitude.

It is a paradox that to achieve more, in Yoga and in life, it is vital to slow down and engage with whatever we are doing in this very moment. Habits of striving and busy-ness creep onto our mats and

hamper our Yoga practices. Although people may think they are achieving more in an instant, actually they are not. Another related paradox is that to achieve more we have to set less ambitious, (aka. more realistic) goals.

## **timing and pace in different traditions – blurring the boundaries**

Different traditions tend to be associated with different speeds or timings. Although there is some truth to that at a structural level, there are perhaps more similarities than there are differences.

It is often said that postures are held for different amounts of time in different traditions. A rule of thumb is 2 to 2 and a half minutes in Iyengar, 5 breaths in Ashtanga and 5 minutes in Yin.

Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga and Anatomy expert, explains that asymmetrical postures are generally held for 2 to 2 and a half minutes on each side. 5 breaths is often the time period associated with Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. But how long does it take to take 5 breaths?

I timed myself taking 5 long and deep breaths (without forcing or trying): 2 minutes 16 seconds, which is astoundingly close to the times for Iyengar and Yin asymmetrical postures. The Ashtanga method demands that practitioners take long and deep breaths. On the mat, people have a tendency to take shorter breaths when they



Strength built slowly - Kino MacGregor's workshop

are struggling but that is not the intention of the method. It is possible to take 5 short breaths in 20 seconds, but that is not what the practice has in mind!

The 5 breaths of Ashtanga Yoga are merely a guide. Personally, if I feel that I am breathing faster than normal and am having trouble slowing, I make sure that I take more breaths. Hamish Hendry and Kino MacGregor, the UK and Florida's leading Ashtanga instructors respectively, both say that there is no limit to the amount of time Ashtanga allows a practitioner to spend in a posture. I remember Guruji, the late Sri K Pattabhi Jois and founder of the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga tradition, being asked how long people could stay in headstand. He said that 30 breaths was a good length of time but they could stay as long as they wanted. When pressed further as to whether there was a maximum time, he responded that it depended on what else they had to do during the day.

Taking too much time to get into postures, however, can be an excuse or an avoidance technique. That is one of the reasons for Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga's relatively quick transitions between postures. In Iyengar-based traditions students typically take longer to set up postures and get into them. Ruth White, senior Iyengar student and UK teacher trainer recalls, however, that Iyengar would get people to work faster if there was fear in a posture so that they did not have time to doubt themselves.

Generally, it is true that holds are longest in Yin Yoga. Sarah Powers, Yin and Insight Yoga expert, practises other traditions alongside Yin. She believes that Yin was an appropriate complimentary discipline to the more active styles because "having time in practise, to really touch into the material which is sometimes underneath what is most obvious, requires that we are still for longer". It is in the stillness that much of the change occurs.

### the speed of progress

Slow is not the purview of Yin Yoga. Often, the more advanced the practitioner, the stronger the recommendation to take ones time. Saraswati, Guruji's daughter says: "Don't hurry, this practice takes time, the more you try to rush it, the more you will miss what it is actually about.... Everything has its own time." Sharat, his grandson, tells of a time when Guruji did not give him an additional posture for a year. It was not until he gave up wanting and expecting a new posture that Guruji decided that he was ready for it.

Kino MacGregor was one of the weakest people when she started yoga. A self-proclaimed lump of "jelly" on the mat, she is now one of the strongest women in Yoga and one of the few in the world practising the fourth series of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. Coming from such a place of physical weakness, Kino has broken down each element of the body to teach herself the strength she needed to be able to progress in her practice. Beyond anatomical structure, Kino repeatedly returns to the same recommendation for building strength: move slowly and deliberately.

Moving slowly develops the slow-twitch muscle fibres which David Gorman explains are those needed to stay in a pose without fatiguing, as opposed to the fast twitch fibres, used for actions such as sprinting. Moving more slowly develops deep strength and ultimately the kind of muscles which provide effortless support.

### attitude and emotions

"Each posture is an attitude", says Ruth White. Yoga helps us to change our attitudes. She advises that we "open the heart" when we practise both physically and emotionally. We are often held back by what Ruth calls "false emotions", fear, anxiety etc. "What dissolves all these "false emotions"", Ruth explains, "is love".

In her workshop on strength, Kino MacGregor says that she is worried that it may sound trite but “Love is the only form of strength which has no limits”. You can always draw on love. The already quiet class gets even quieter as the depth of her statement reverberates around the room and plants a seed of change.

Yoga was intended to be used to develop our whole being. The physical side is intimately linked with the emotional and spiritual, and reflects it. Thus our mental attitude deeply affects the postures we make and our progress towards achieving greater strength and flexibility. Kino explains that when we aim too high, we set ourselves up for failure and continual disappointment. If, instead, we consider success the very act of pushing to get off the floor, (if we are not able to lift ourselves), we create the conditions required to keep repeating the work we need to do to ultimately lift. This approach is very much in line with Aadil Palkhivala’s mantra – “Don’t perform, explore” and Guruji’s counselling to “Think only God” when you practise.



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*The calm in the storm – Marichasana B in Kino MacGregor’s lead class*

## 10 do’s and don’ts of speed

**DO** move slowly and deliberately in your practice. It will help to build strength and the right type of muscle fibres.

**DO** question what you are trying to achieve. If you have your heart set on “achieving” a posture, Paul Grilley recommends examining your motivation: what do you think you are going to achieve?

**DON’T** choose more over slower: If you are running out of time in your practice – practise less postures. Always make sure to end in relaxation (either Savasana or a comfortable seated posture). Your practice is about quality not quantity of postures.

**DO** practise Ahimsa! Make your practice non-violent, and cultivate an attitude of love. When you find yourself being self-critical, treat yourself as you would treat someone else, perhaps a child, with love and compassion.

**DO** set very small goals. If you have to set goals make them easily achievable ones that will keep you on your mat and keep you coming back for more.

**DO** slow it down if you feel yourself breathing too quickly. Start by extending whichever side of the breath (inhale or exhale) is shortest to match the other side. Remember – if you cannot breathe you probably should not be there.

**DO** take more breaths in a posture if you are counting breaths and breathing too fast. If for some reason you are having trouble slowing down your breathing – either stop for a while until it regulates or take more breaths.

**DO** focus on your breath. If you find yourself straining, focus on your breath and your balance. The breath is a great anchor: just by observe it, it will begin to even out and calm you down.

**DO** focus on your balance. David Gorman recommends focusing on your balance and distributing your weight evenly across contact points with the ground. Even in seated postures, this can result in amazing transformation.

**DON’T** beat yourself up. Practise with love.

# yoga perspectives

## how to stay grounded through the feet

PART 8

Photo: Frank Klinckenberg



*Mia taking time out to ground and centre by coming back to the heart. Aadil*

**Staying grounded is challenging in Yoga but also in life, particularly over the Christmas period when events, people and preparations can easily destabilise us. Feet are the connection with the earth in much of our daily lives and many Yoga postures. They, and our attention to them, keep us both physically and mentally grounded.**



*Buddha's feet adorned with flower-like designs, Buddhist caves in Sri Lanka.*

Given their importance and the amount of work they do, people could reasonably be expected to take good care of their feet. Yet, for some reason (perhaps their distance from our heads?), we have a tendency to ignore our feet, put them in tight restrictive shoes, and be generally ungrateful for the services.

### Feet in Yoga

Feet are fundamental in all types of Yoga – but sometimes for different reasons. In the Ashtanga Vinyasa system and Iyengar-based types of Yoga, they are vital in the standing postures. They are our foundation and connection to earth and gravity which can, paradoxically, be used to support us. In Yin Yoga, the main meridians begin and end in the feet.

Our feet are incredible and individual. Each foot has 26 bones, plus a few very small sesamoid bones under the big toe. David Gorman (Anatomy, Alexander Technique and Learning Methods expert) explains that this number varies in different people. The foot also contains many muscles, more than 20 of which help hold the bones in place and give the foot its shape. All of these muscles work together to help us balance while standing.

Structural flaws in the feet translate their way through the body and can give us unexpected aches and pains elsewhere as the body attempts to compensate for its foundational instability.

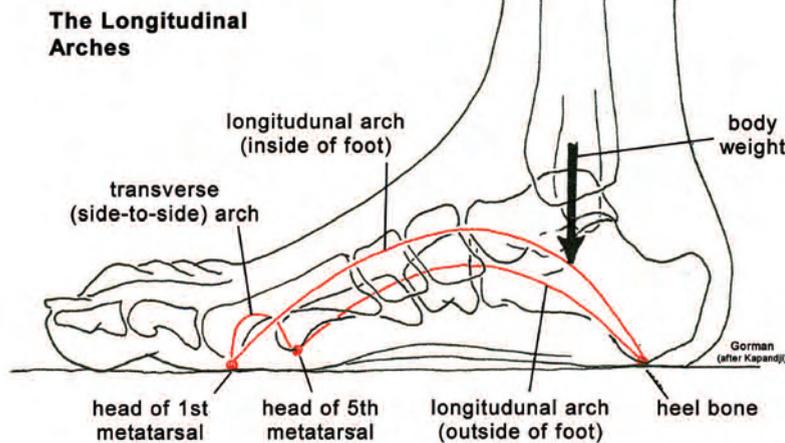


Diagram of the Transverse Arches, by David Gorman

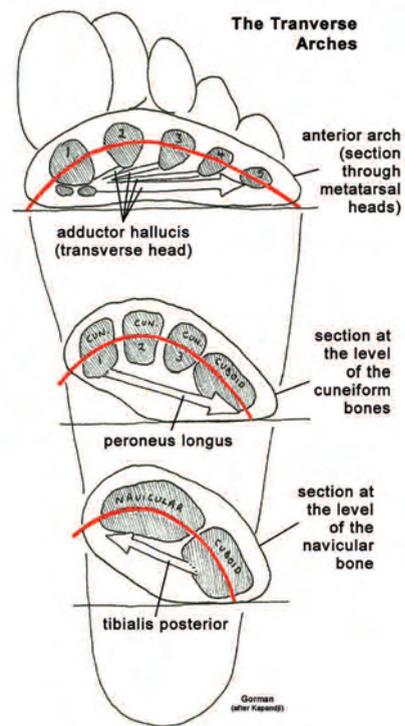


Diagram of the Longitudinal Arches, by David Gorman

### The foot as a foundation

People often think of the foot as flat on the ground. Although most are aware that the foot has an arch, relatively few people know that the foot in fact has 6 arches: 3 longitudinal and 3 transverse (see Diagram 1).

Kino MacGregor (Ashtanga Yoga expert) explains that there are 3 main points of contact between the foot and the ground: underneath the base of the big toe, underneath the base of the little toe and the heel (these are the points that link the longitudinal arches – see Diagram 2). Those 3 points of the foot create a stable tripod structure. So whenever people are balancing, they should not think of their foot as being flat on the ground, but instead as a pivot helping to find balance between these 3 points. People should aim to have conscious control over where the weight is distributed, ideally equally, between these 3, according to Kino.

It is common for people to try to balance in challenging postures and feel that their weight is pressing more into the outside of the foot. When that happens, they sometimes try to grip with their toes and the base of the big toe starts to lift from the ground. That compromises the structural integrity of the foot and makes it impossible to use the inside arch to maintain balance. Instead of gripping with the toes, people should work firmly with the 3 points. Pressing into the points engages the natural arches of the foot which form a 3-pronged structural support and naturally lifted inner-arch as well as a natural arch along the metatarsals.

### Foot control

The foot contains many muscles, as do the hands, explains David Gorman. Though people do not generally use the feet for manipulation (except those without arms), they have great potential. This is shown by Kino MacGregor who has remarkable conscious control over her feet. Over the years I have known her, I have always enjoyed seeing how her toes spread out - particularly in inverted postures, where she is able to move her little toe back and forth towards and away from its neighbour in a movement that just looks happy!

Kino's happy feet have been my inspiration to move my toes, so I asked for her advice on how to gain this type of mobility. She explained that the first step is developing awareness, feeling and sensitivity. If we neglect our feet or just cram them into closed shoes

without giving them space to be and feel their relationship to the ground, not only is it hard for us to get the mobility and flexibility that we want but it is also hard for us to develop inner connection.

It is important to develop a healthy relationship between the body and the floor beneath, explains Kino. The more that we begin to use our foot by pressing into those 3 points, the more we will have the structural support from which to spread the toes apart. If we just try to spread the toes without structural support, then the body tends to give us feedback that it is not safe to do so. The spreading of the toes and the opening of the foot happen as a kinaesthetic result of having a solid structural foundation, which is the result of pressing down. This facilitates an opening and spreading which makes the tripod structure even more solid.



Kino MacGregor showing control over the feet with toes spread wide (Photo: Mina Kuhn)



*Grounding and peaceful, Mia presses her feet in butterfly pose/ baddhakonasana among the ancient statues of Buddha in Sri Lanka*

### **The foot as a gateway to the physical and energetic body**

In Yin Yoga, explains Sarah Powers (Yin and Insight Yoga expert), the poses act as a means to stimulate the circulation in different meridians. Many of the key meridians begin or end in the feet and they are connected to major organs. The liver, the kidney and the spleen all have their inception points in the feet. The gallbladder, the urinary bladder and the stomach meridian start in the head but all end in the feet. In Yin Yoga, the feet are together in Butterfly pose and we sit on the feet in Saddle pose. Sarah recommends pressing the feet points (particularly the kidney point located just under the arch of the foot and described in her book) in Forward Bends if people can reach them. This stimulates the circulation and acts as a kind of self administered reflexology.

### **Feet in everyday life**

Attention is key. In everyday life, where we put our attention drives our experience. When we worry, rush or overload ourselves, our attention is often limited to the narrow confines of our head. The rest of our body and mind suffers along with our general experience and sense of happiness.

Bringing our attention to our feet and the ground beneath us is a great way of becoming more grounded and calm, generally enhancing our everyday experience.

Christmas can be a hard time to stay grounded, with shopping and preparations, family and memories, as well as fun and parties, making demands on our time, energy, wallets and heartstrings. Three key elements will help you stay grounded over the Christmas period:

- 1 Make sure you focus on your feet and their connection to the ground beneath them in your Yoga practice and from time to time throughout the day.
- 2 Don't put too much pressure on yourself. We can feel pressure over the Christmas period to get things 'just right'. Remember that perfection is an illusion and start to enjoy the wonderful imperfections in your life. Don't expect everything to go according to plan – enjoy the unpredictable!
- 3 Keep coming back to the present! Here and now is where life is happening! Stop and smell the flowers ... or the snow ... or the burnt Christmas pudding!

Have a lovely Christmas!

## Handy hints on staying grounded while shopping

### Plan A

**Don't put too much pressure on yourself** - and make sure you always have a Plan B.

**Don't rush and take plenty of breaks** - David Gorman explains that one of the quickest ways to be taken off balance and put undue forces on your feet is to be rushing. Just a moment's attention to the feeling of the ground under your feet is often enough to bring you back to the moment, to slow down and take your time to breathe and look around and sense what is important. On the street, as in Yoga, being present is consciousness-altering.

**Practise non-attachment.** We can get so attached at Christmas-time to getting everything done and done quickly, to buying the perfect gift for our friends and loved ones. Take a step back, slow down, don't panic, make gift purchasing fun, an adventure and an opportunity to explore and connect (at least energetically) to the person you're buying for.

### Plan B

If you're the type of person who feels they have to get everything just so, don't despair! Just be aware of this and when you put pressure on yourself, make sure to bring compassionate awareness to what you are doing.

It may be unrealistic not to rush around at Christmas-time with so much to do. A close friend, Fereshteh Guillion, has some invaluable advice: if you have to walk fast, bring your attention to the space between your feet as you walk. This will help you to stay grounded.

**Be aware of your attachments** to things like getting the perfect gifts for your loved ones or making sure all of the preparations are in order. Just being aware of these attachments and looking at them non-judgmentally will help lighten the load.

### Handy Hints on staying grounded anywhere (including at the dinner table!)

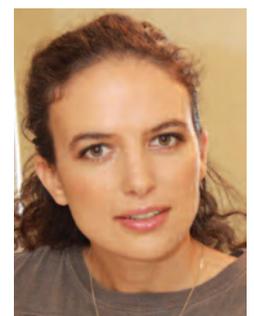
- 1 Feel the back of your body and your feet – if you are feeling uncomfortable or ungrounded. Make sure to bring your attention to the back of your body, your feet and your connection to the ground. When we are busy with so much to do, our energy tends to be in front. Bringing our attention to the back of our bodies helps us to feel grounded and redress that imbalance.
- 2 Bring your attention through your body – starting from your head, moving down through your neck and become fully aware of whatever you are feeling section by section in each part of your body down to your feet. Feel their connection with the ground.
- 3 Go underground! Bring your attention underground – for the super-grounded sensation. Once you have grounded in the previous exercise, start by bringing your attention about a foot (30 cm) under the ground, then a yard or a meter, then as far as you can go until you reach the centre of the earth. When you resurface for dessert, you will feel much more grounded and present and really be able to enjoy the flavours of the moment!

### Taking a time out

- 1 Give yourself a foot massage and exercise your toes. Sit calmly and make time to connect with your feet by massaging them and pressing gently to locate any points of tension. John White (Ruth

White's husband and fellow Iyengar-based Karuna Yoga instructor) teaches an amazing self-foot massage. Where this massage is different and challenging is that it includes threading your fingers between your toes. Go gently, this can be painful so be careful! Thread the fingers between the toes and hold as if gently gripping the feet. Gently start to move the foot back and forth. As you get more comfortable, move the foot clockwise and anti-clockwise in circular motions.

- 2 Meditate and connect to your heart. Aadil Palkhivala and his wife Mirra teach a wonderful meditation where you start with your hands behind your head – breath in. On the next out-breath, bring your hands in prayer position to the front of your head at the level of your 'third eye'. On at out-breath, bring your hands down to your heart and breathing out, all of the energy moves into your heart. Repeat the same action, but starting with your hands behind your hips, bring them round to the front and up to the heart. Repeat as many times as you like. Feel open and centred through your heart.
- 3 Get a pedicure! Every so often treat yourself and show thanks to your feet. Your feet will feel wonderful and there is no treat like taking care of the parts of ourselves that we most often neglect.



*Mia has recently launched a new website [www.WordsUnite.org](http://www.WordsUnite.org), which complements her current website [www.SustainYourself.co.uk](http://www.SustainYourself.co.uk). She would greatly appreciate your feedback and there is a chance to win a FREE coaching session*

# yoga perspectives

finding balance & resolution

by Mia Forbes Pirie

PART 9



“Real change and balance come from making small but consistent changes and building on our successes.”

**New Year, New You? But, how do you avoid tripping up in the same places as last year? Simple. By being resolved and finding balance – or at least searching for it! The strange thing about balance is that it is always moving, never fixed. So the secret is to hover closer and closer to a balance point and always be open to change.**

Physical balance equals mental balance. So, focusing on balance in Yoga postures will help to develop the stability and resolution to achieve the heart's desires during the New Year.

## setting appropriate goals and resolutions

The New Year is a time for making resolutions. After the excesses of the festive season, people often feel the desire to compensate. But we must be careful not to aim too high or over-promise lest we get disappointed and give up altogether. Ambitious resolutions are often not followed through and by February or March people are back normal, feeling that they have let themselves down.

Breaking promises to ourselves has more serious consequences than most people realise and is worse than not making any promises at all. Caroline Myss Ph.D, medical intuitive, explains if people negotiate even to themselves, they are chipping away at the strength and endurance that it takes to develop a strong and honourable spirit. She believes that breaking promises to oneself is the cause of many people's depression and inability to love themselves.

Real change and balance come from making small but consistent changes and building on our successes. When you are making resolutions this year, ask yourself, how sustainable they are. Set realistic achievable goals – even smaller goals than you think you can achieve – in order to build strength, resolve and self-esteem and in the long term achieve far more than you thought possible. Allow yourself to succeed and build on your own success.

Building good habits towards your long-term goal is more important than pushing yourself hard in the beginning and risking burning out or becoming discouraged. Even if you achieve your goal in the short-term you are unlikely to be able to maintain it unless you have built the habits to support it. There is a balance to be struck between strong discipline and gentle loving kindness. Both are important.

### Discipline: 'Please Stay on the Path'!

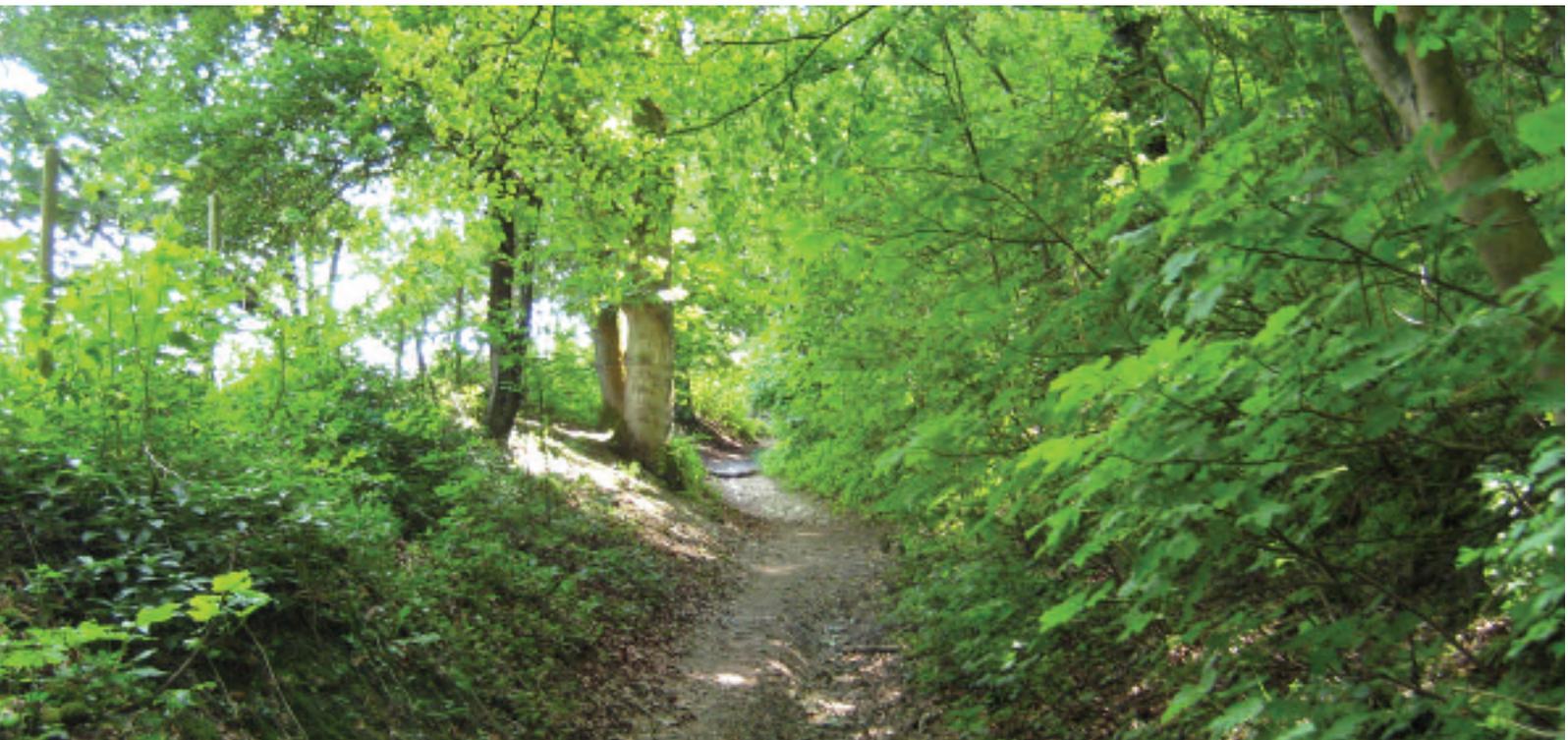
Recently, I attended a 3 day silent Vipassana meditation course (silent, with the exception of the possibility of one conversation a day with the teacher). The first day, feeling unwell, I had trouble focussing. At one point, we were meant to simply observe the sensations in the area between our upper lip and our nose but thoughts kept entering my mind and distracting me. I became frustrated. Sharing my concerns with the teacher, I explained the solution I had found. I could observe the thoughts and if I did that, they went away, allowing me to return to focussing on the area I was supposed to be focussing on! I asked the teacher what he thought of its merits. Smiling, he told me that it was 'a' practice but not 'the' practice. He suggested that I should keep returning to the technique and allow the thoughts to continue to be in the background.

Later that day, I went for a walk. Just off the path at the meditation centre was a sign. It read: 'Please Stay on the Path'. I walked the track a few times and, each time I saw this sign, I began to smile and laugh softly to myself. That sign and the teacher's words reminded me how easy it is to get side-tracked with colourful thoughts, pains and feelings. Perhaps our greatest challenge every day is to keep our eyes on the ball and avoid being distracted. The practice of Yoga and meditation, balance and resolution, and any other practice that leads us to balance – mental and physical – demands that we maintain our resolution. In order to stay balanced, we must maintain our focus and, with judicious, gentle and loving discipline, we must remind ourselves to 'Please Stay on the Path'.

During my next meditation, with great discipline, I kept returning to the technique. The path was cleared, and eventually, I settled and became peaceful and balanced.

control, is our primary means of controlling balance, explains David Gorman, Alexander Technique, Learning Methods and balance expert. The 'contact' sense, ie the sensation of contact with our supporting surface, is one of the 5 main inputs to our balance and co-ordination mechanisms. David teaches a workshop called 'Standing on Top of the World'. He shares with us an exercise in learning physical balance which can be used in our Yoga practices and out on the street (See practice: Learning Balance)

Balancing on one foot is based on the same principles as balancing on both feet. Although the smaller the surface area touching the floor, the more important concentration becomes. In any posture standing on one leg, make the foundation leg the main focus and priority. Make sure you press into the 3 key points in the foot (base of the big toe, base of the little toe and heel) and that the pressure is evenly distributed across the foot. Make sure the leg is strong and focus



### finding physical balance

*Samasthiti*, Mountain pose or *Tadasana* as it is also called, is often considered the most basic posture. After all, it merely involves standing on a mat. Undertaken correctly, with proper awareness, it is the foundation for all of the other standing poses and the place where we can safely learn strength and balance which will serve us for all postures.

In the 'Yoga Matrix', Richard Freeman, Yoga and Philosophy expert, explains that some of the basic Yoga practices reveal the profound process of Yoga: the process of observation and constant readjustment which can reveal all of our patterns and assist us in the realisation of constant change and impermanence.

Samasthiti is one of these. It involves standing with your feet together and tuning in to the central axis of the body. 'Sama' means equal and so, eventually, we end up with the weight distributed equally across the roots of the toes and between the 2 heels. Freeman compares Samasthiti to standing on top of a flag pole! Just to maintain the pose, you have to pay close attention, but the attention has to be very intelligent or flexible because we start to sway off the central axis and automatically the body and the mind begin to create a compensatory pattern which generally becomes an overcompensation.

The sensitivity inherent in the feet and toes, plus the fine motor

on your gaze point. I sometimes like to imagine a white light shining through it which helps intensify my focus. Once you are set up, all you need is discipline and perseverance.

All Yoga practices teach you discipline and balance. Maty Ezraty (Iyengar and Ashtanga expert) explains that in Iyengar Yoga, the alignment principles of *Tadasana*/*Samasthiti* should be taught and reviewed before teaching almost any other posture. This helps us see how they live in every pose. Fine-tuning and refining our understanding of the pose will lead to a healthy Yoga practice. In the Ashtanga method, alignment usually is not emphasised as much. We use the time in *Samasthiti* to come to attention and bring our awareness to our breath, coming back to our centre. Although Yin Yoga does not contain any standing postures, Yin and its longer held poses teach you to 'stay' and persevere gently when the going gets tough.

Stay focused, but do not lose your sense of humour! Happy New Year! I wish you great resolve, compassion and a lot of fun playing with balance!

*In 2011, the Yoga Perspectives Series will continue on a bi-monthly basis. Mia has recently launched a new website [www.WorlDsUnite.org](http://www.WorlDsUnite.org), which complements her current website [www.SustainYourself.co.uk](http://www.SustainYourself.co.uk). She would greatly appreciate your feedback and there is a chance to win a FREE coaching session.*

# learning balance

by David Gorman, Alexander Technique and Balance Expert

Come to standing and notice where the contact is between you and the floor. Is it more to the front of your feet, more to the back of your feet, or more to one side than the other? If you are not sure, move slightly backwards or forwards or sideways, so that you can feel the contact change. If you are like the majority of people, in your normal standing position, you will have more contact with the front or maybe more contact with the back and, additionally, maybe more to one side than the other. If so, then you are standing somewhat out of support ... not falling, of course, but enough to be forcing your system into various reactions to support you.

To see what this means, adjust your standing so that you have an even distribution of contact (near as you can tell), that is as much contact to the front as you have to the back and as much on one foot as you have on the other. Now give yourself about half a minute to let your system adjust and for you to notice what this feels like.

Now lean a little bit backwards, just enough that you can feel the contact shift back on your feet. And as you move backwards see if you notice anything else happen within you. If you do not notice much, come back to the even distribution of contact and then go back a little bit more, noticing what happens within you as you go back. You will probably have noticed one or more things. The most common is a grabbing and tightening in the thighs just above the knees. If you want to directly experience what this tightening reaction is doing for you, just do the exploration again but ask that tightening not to happen (ie stop it from occurring). If you succeed, you will notice that you begin to fall over just as soon as you start moving back.

Depending on your postural habits, you may also notice a tightening around your abdomen, or interference with your breathing. These will be more apparent if you make the exploration again but this time go back a little further. If you go even further back you will notice your arms reach out forward to 'save' your balance, and your whole middle thrust forward as a compensation.

The point here is not the specific things that happen but rather that as soon as you go the slightest bit off that even distribution of contact, your system automatically jumps in with some sort of holding, tightening, distorting compensation to protect you from falling over. There is no way to avoid this.

Try the same thing by returning to the even distribution of contact and going forward a little bit, then a bit more, and then even more, and you will find the same sorts of automatic balance reactions occurring but in the opposite direction.

In other words, what started off being called an 'even distribution of contact' is really your 'centre of support'. Luckily for you, it is simply and consciously available at any time.

With these and other simple balance 'experiments', you should be able to directly sense the strain and forces that are added when you operate out of support (and the ease when you are centred). Even in simple bending or standing from a chair, out of support movement can add up to 1,000 lbs of force on the lower spine or hip joints. Imagine what can happen to some Yoga uncentred poses!

So, if you want to be as free and flexible as possible, it is well worth playing around with this, noticing how often you use yourself 'out of support' in any of the movements of your daily life and in your Yoga practice, and how big a difference it makes when you take a moment to come back into a centred support.

*If you want to try further explorations from David Gormley's 'Standing on Top of the World', visit: <http://bit.ly/iaDOEg>.*