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Session summaries by Kerry Tani

- [Problem Solving: Backbends \(Julie Gudmestad\)](#)
- [Pranayama: Gateway to the Soul \(Rod Stryker\)](#)
- [Insight Yoga: Exploring How and Why to Meditate \(Sarah Powers\)](#)
- [Introduction to the Yoga Sutras \(Kate Holcombe\)](#)
- [Common Aches and Pains: Viniyoga for the Upper Back, Neck, and Shoulders \(Gary Kraftsow\)](#)
- [Changing the World, Breath by Breath \(Cyndi Lee\)](#)

Problem Solving: Backbends

Julie Gudmestad

<http://www.gudmestadyoga.com/>

Terminology:

- Spinal extension occurs in a backbend.
- Spinal flexion occurs in a forward bend.
- Shoulder extension occurs when the arms are straight down and to the back.
- Shoulder flexion occurs when the arms are extended straight up overhead.
When the palms also face each other, this is external rotation of the shoulder.

In a backbend, you want shoulder flexion and external rotation. The triceps should be facing forward.

A healthy spine has natural areas of flexion and extension. The lumbar spine and cervical spine are normally in extension. The thoracic spine is normally in flexion. Over time, the front of the chest tends to shorten, exacerbating flexion of the thoracic spine. In a pose like cobra, an over-flexed thoracic may cause the lumbar and cervical areas to hyperextend.

Tight hip flexors also lead to issues with backbends, primarily in the iliopsoas. The iliopsoas

is actually composed of two muscles, the iliacus and the psoas, which lie deep in the back of the abdomen. If you looked at the front of a body with the internal organs removed, you would see the psoas lying alongside the spine, attached to the sides of the lumbar vertebrae. The iliacus originates on the inner bowl of the pelvis. Both muscles cross the floor of the pelvis, emerge at the outer edges of the pubic bones, and finally insert on the inner upper femur (thighbone).¹

Julie showed us the location of the iliopsoas using a full-size model of a skeleton and pelvic bones.

A lot of sitting leads to shortening of this muscle group (and the surrounding muscles). When standing, shortening of these muscles leads to compression/hyperextension of the lumbar, or a bent-over position. The condition also results in an anterior tilt of the pelvis.

¹ http://www.gudmestadyoga.com/articles_julie/get_hip.htm

Recommended actions:

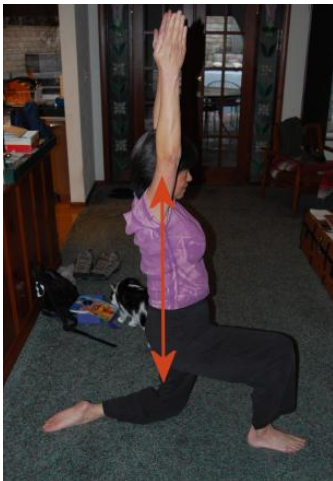
Stabilize the lumbar spine while stretching the front of the chest and stretching the iliopsoas. The iliopsoas is an external rotator—to avoid the stretch, it will try to rotate while stretching.

To avoid compression of the lumbar spine in backbends, do not allow legs to externally rotate (toes pointing out to the side).

Hip stretching balances the actions taken to stretch the hamstrings.

Sequence to open the hips:

- Down dog
- Lunge with back knee off the ground, hands on the floor on either side of the front foot
- Lunge with back knee on the floor; shoulders are directly above the hips, front shin is vertical. Raise arms straight up overhead. Slightly lean the pelvis forward to emphasize hip opening, without leaning the torso forward.



- Vira I with the back heel against the wall to eliminate any external rotation of the back leg. Helps keep the hips square. Press the top of a strap over the top of the front thigh (very close to the crease) to ground the front leg.



Keep the sacrum neutral; let the tail bone drop. Release the strap and energetically raise the arms straight up overhead, keeping the torso over the hips.



Hamstrings and glutes are hip extensors. These muscles tend to want to externally rotate the leg. When the glutes grip the tailbone, external rotation results.

In locust, press the pelvis to the floor and keep the hipbones on the floor. Engage other muscles to avoid external rotation of the leg. Can also experience this starting on hands & knees, then extend one leg straight back, engaging the glutes as little as possible.

Half bridge: To avoid external rotation, press a block between the feet and press the balls of the feet into the block. Can also place the block between the knees. Keep the feet parallel. Press into the base of the big toe and inner heel. Lift from the tailbone, come up halfway, and pause. Let the hip extensors work without gripping.

Knee issues may occur because hip extensors are so strong. They pull on the outside of the knee. Grounding through the feet may help. Also try using a block between the knees.

Supported backbend to open the chest and thoracic spine

- Lie over a narrow rolled blanket or mat, placed crosswise. Lie on your side to start, with the rolled blanket under the armpit. Roll onto the back.
- Use a larger roll if you are more flexible.
- Do not place the roll under the lumbar.
- Bend the knees, scooch the butt toward the heels and then straighten the legs to lengthen the low back.
- Place the arms in goalpost position to lengthen the pecs. Can put props under the arms if the arms are hanging instead of lying flat. Can straighten the arms if the fingers tingle.
- Can place a support under the head to avoid a hyperextended neck.

Salabasana

- Lie on the belly.
- Lift each leg, stretch it out straight, and set it down.
- Lie on the tops of the feet with the knee facing straight down.
- Ground the pelvis.
- Palms face in next to the thighs.
- Lift the nose and upper chest.
- Stretch the fingertips toward the feet.

Bhujangasana

- Same actions as salabasana. Firm the glutes, but do not grip.

Shoulder

When arms are overhead, internal rotation (palms forward) tends to lead to a pinch in the shoulders. Therefore, externally rotate the arms (palms facing) to avoid the pinch.

Stretching pecs and lats:

Lie across a rolled blanket placed high under the shoulders. Place a support under the head. Extend the arms up overhead, in external rotation, palms facing. Use a strap looped above the elbows to prevent internal rotation.



Pranayama: The Gateway to the Soul

Rod Stryker
<http://parayoga.com/>

Exercise: Ask yourself what you want, and what's stopping you from getting what you want?

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, there are 4 mentions of asana and 4 mentions of pranayama. The sutras say that with an asana practice, pairs of opposites (such as good/bad) cease to have impact. You are able to remain steady in the midst of change.

With a pranayama practice, the veil over your inner light is removed. That which blocks our own inner illumination is dissolved. This is the beginning of enlightenment.

We tend to have the same pattern of breathing, and every time we "breathe" we embed that pattern of breathing. The way you breathe is the way you are. Therefore, change the way you breathe to change the way you are.

S = Shakti, desire (can be good or bad)

V = Vayu, the means to achieve an end

K = Karma, bondage, resistance to achieving what you want

F = Fulfillment, what it takes to get you what you want

î = intensity

$$\hat{i} (S + V) > K \approx F$$

This formula means: If the intensity of the sum of desire and the means to achieve it is greater than the resistance, you fulfill your desire.

A complete breath occupies these areas:

- Lower body/lower abdomen
- Pubic line to the solar plexus
- Solar plexus to collarbones
- Collar bones to just above that point

Then, allow the breath to integrate in those spaces.

In terms of the prana vayus, these areas are described as:

Vayu	Location	Action/Animation	Function (physical and mental)
Apana	Pelvis	Descending	Elimination
Samana	Abdomen	Equalizing	Assimilation
Pran	Heart area	Energizing, regenerating	Recharging, bringing in
Udana	Throat	Ascending	Growth
Vyana	Aura, everywhere	Distributing, circulating	Circulation and integration

Practice

- Lie over a rolled mat or blanked, placed along the spine.
- Always begin pranayama from a relaxed state.
- Allow the breath to deepen into a quiet ujjayi.

- Allow the inhale to descend and fill the pelvic floor.
- Allow the inhale to widen in a V up the body, widening the ribs, back body, and side ribs, rising into the chest. The collarbones elevate last.
- On the exhale, allow the navel to release first to activate mula bandha. Then the collarbones move down, the ribs narrow, the abdomen drops into the spine.

Consider the psychological functions of the vayus to change whatever obstacles you are facing. Change the breath in the corresponding vayu, to affect the psychological function.

Most people aren't aware of their dysfunctional (incomplete) breathing. The objective is to bring awareness of challenged areas of the breath.

Patanjali says that pranayama can be controlled by time (counts of the in/out breath), space (psychic space) or number (repetitions).

Space can be internal or external. External space is expressed as angula, the Sanskrit term for finger widths. This measurement determines how forceful the breath is. During pranayama, a less forceful breath is more powerful. For example, you should be able to feel your breath 4-8 finger widths (4-8 angula) away.

Seated Pranayama/Meditation

Inhale from the heart with intention. Fill the pelvis up through the abdomen, chest and throat. Picture light at the crown of the head. Exhale down and see light at the base of the spine.

Insight Yoga: Exploring How and Why to Meditate

Sarah Powers

<http://sarahpowers.com/>

Meditation may be simple but it's not easy.

The practitioner should define three things for meditation: purpose, method, and results.

There are two primary methods of Buddhist meditation: concentration (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*).

Samatha

A concentration practice sounds like there is a need to strive, which requires effort and therefore doesn't sound "fun." Instead, we will use the term *samatha* (pronounced SHAH-ma-ta) to describe the fruition of the practice, calm abidance and tranquility. By using a non-English word, we avoid negative connotations associated with the word "concentration."

Samatha allows attention to rest on an anchor of interest (rather than attempting to make something happen). This leads to more control over the mind. Uncontrolled, the mind is always in search of stimulation. Samatha allows you to be at home with yourself, by telling the mind to stay.

The breath is an anchor that you can focus on, without manipulating the breath. Pay attention to the breath without making the object more obvious. Sustained attention is not easy, because the breath is always changing. Even as the breath changes, the quality of attention does not change. Actually, the real object is the attention itself.

This practice helps you to develop calm abidance. The practice also prepares the mind for experiential insights.

The instruction is to stay. The mind will leave—celebrate the fact that you return.

Practice samatha for 5 minutes in each of the following postures:

- Butterfly
- Sphinx
- Forward fold

When you have the ability to stay, you gain access to deeper truths.

Vipassana

Mindfulness, or *vipassana*, is a way to see things as they are, free of preferences and prejudices.

Remember to attend to what's occurring in the present moment, your immediate experience. The purpose of vipassana is to liberate us from reactive states to see our essential nature.

Samatha is exclusive: the focus is on one thing (the breath). Vipassana is inclusive: the anchor is whatever is most dominant in the moment. This can be a physical sensation, or a mind state ("thinking" about something), or hearing, or an emotion. It is not about what's happening, but about your relationship to what's happening.

The objective of vipassana is non-interfering. Don't attempt to change what is happening, just pay attention. Know what's happening when it is happening, what's changing, and what's not happening.

Develop mindfulness in stages:

1. The body (sensations)—for example, throbbing knees. Widen the range of sensations that arise without fighting them. Become aware of how we struggle and suffer, so that these sensations don't control you.
2. Feeling tones (discomfort). Become cognizant of the feeling and explore it. Does the feeling cause an emotion? Does discomfort lead to aversion?
3. Mindfulness of mindful states.
4. Mindfulness of the dharmas, phenomenon, and environment.

Introduction to the Yoga Sutras

Kate Holcombe
<http://healingyoga.org/>

Kate studied the sutras with T.K.V. Desikachar.

Characteristics of the sutras:

- There are no verbs. They are concise so that they can be memorized.
- They are intentional. Word usage is deliberate. There is no ambiguity.
- The words are used in a dignified manner.
- They are practical and experiential.
- They are universal, timeless, and open to everyone.
- They contain a depth and richness. There is more to learn each time they are studied.

Because of these characteristics, they are meant to be taught by a teacher.

The Sutras consist of 4 chapters:

1. What is yoga?
2. How can you reach the state of yoga, regardless of your starting point?
3. What do you do when you reach yoga? What are the material benefits?
4. What are the nonmaterial benefits?

Chapter 1: Samadhi Pada

Samadhi means clarity. Concentration leads to clarity.

This chapter begins by defining the goal.

1.1 Atha yoga nushasanam

The teacher chants this sutra as a means of asking the student: Are you ready? This will be a long practice. It will be hard work. Have you set your intention? Whatever else you were

doing before, that's done now. You are here now.

The students chant this sutra as a way of confirming to the teacher that they are ready.

Historically, students learned all sutras as chants first, and then they studied the meaning.

1.2 Yoga citta vritti nirodah

Niroda = putting on blinders, focus

Citta vritti = functions, activities

Yoga is the focusing of the functions of the mind on a chosen direction; concentration.

1.3 Tada drastu svarupe avastanam

When you are in a state of yoga, then, the seer is firmly established in its own form. Act from the place of the true Self.

The mind is not permanent and does not always see clearly. The Purusha or cit or Self or Seer or Atman is not the mind, but can only see through the mind. The mind is how the Self perceives the world, and how the Self expresses itself. Yoga is used to refine and clean the mind (like a dirty lens can be cleaned to see through it more clearly).

If you can see clearly, you suffer less and act from the true Self.

1.4 Vritti sarupya amitaratra

The rest of the time (when you are not in a state of yoga), the mind thinks it's in control.

The mind should be there only to serve the Self, but if the lens is dirty, the mind ends up in charge.

Think of this like walking a dog: Are you taking the dog for a walk, or is the dog taking you for a walk (pulling on the leash)?

This does not mean that you deny yourself things, but that you give yourself the independence from attachments. It's OK to have emotions, but recognize that they are emotions, deal with the emotion, and move on.

Starting from where you are implies that you can only control you. Stuff happens to everyone but you can stay independent of those things. Don't get hung up on the attachments of the mind because those things change. Remain independent from the mind.

The underlying universal assumption is that there is a Self and the other. (If you don't accept this, then the rest of the sutras don't make sense.)

Viveka (discernment), especially between two things that seem similar but aren't, like the Self and the mind. Chapter 2 describes methods to reduce suffering. These methods comprise the 8 limbs.

2.23: The ability to discern is the opportunity to discover the true nature of each.

2.15: The causes of suffering are change, thirst/wanting, habits, and the human form which is subject to the gunas.

Everybody suffers.

Suffering is the opportunity to learn to discern, and get to know the Self and the mind. It's not about shutting off the mind, but learning that the mind should not lead the Self.

When you identify how the mind acts, you know which tricks are in play (imagination, etc.).

Abhyasa and vairagya—detachment and practice.

Realize that everyone follows a different path.

Have self conviction and inner strength while also realizing that these qualities may change over time.

Isvarapranidhana—trust/surrender to a higher power. (This is sometimes translated as “God” but this is not necessarily how Patanjali meant it.) Also not being attached to the outcome.

Chapter 2

2.1 Kriya yoga: Action in everyday lives.

Describes the qualities of *tapas* (conscious elimination of what is unneeded), *svadhyaya* (self-study), and *isvarapranidhana* (total trust in something other than yourself, doing your best just because you can regardless of the outcome).

2.2: Then you have an experience of the goal: clarity.

The kleshas are reduced.

Kleshas are

- Avidya, incorrect understanding (especially between 2 similar things)
- Asmita, ego
- Raga, excessive desire
- Dvesa, unreasonable aversions
- Abhinivesa, fear of the unknown

Chapter 2 defines the following:

Heyam, things to prevent. We want to avoid suffering.

Avidya, the cause of suffering, confusion.

Hanam, goal and *kaivalyam*, independence. These are reached through *viveka*, discernment.

Apayam, the means to get to the goal; the tools (2.28 – 2.55), the 8 limbs.

Common Aches and Pains: Viniyoga for the Upper Back, Neck, and Shoulders

Gary Kraftsow

<http://www.viniyoga.com/>

Traditional reasons for a yoga practice:

- Eliminate the negative
- Accentuate the positive

These are accomplished by transforming the mind.

The primary intention of yoga therapy is to reduce suffering and the symptoms of suffering via self-care. Asanas are used as tools, not as goals in themselves.

Principles of viniyoga: Differentiate – Adapt – Apply

How viniyoga differs from a traditional practice:

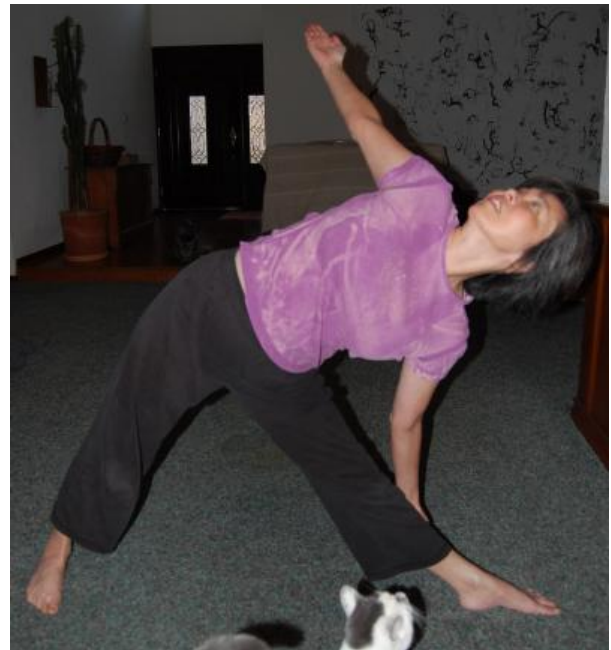
- Focus on the relationship between the flow of breath and the movement of the spine. Use the breath to focus awareness on what is happening.
- Asanas are tools with no meaning in and of themselves. Focus on function rather than form. Form is adaptable.
- Repetition of postures used in addition to staying in position. Exception: fascia responds to staying in position.
- Sequencing of asanas is important.

Considerations for working with the upper back, neck, and shoulders:

- Bones and skeletal alignment. Goal should be to create proper muscular/skeletal alignment. Align the spine vertically and through the shoulder girdle.
- Stability and appropriate range of motion of the ligaments, especially in the shoulders.

- Condition of muscles can be from congenital conditions, usage patterns, and/or skeletal misalignment. Chronic tension held in the neck/shoulder area is termed hypertonicity. Weakened muscles are hypotonic.
- Neuromuscular movement patterns.

Treatment varies if condition is muscular or ligament or skeletal; whether there is a recent or longer-term injury; whether the condition is acute or chronic. Ideally, viniyoga therapy is one-on-one or a focused group (all with the same condition).



Changing the World, Breath by Breath

Cyndi Lee

<http://omyoga.com/>

In meditation practice, start with yourself. Identify what is happening now, but don't react. Don't remove yourself from what is happening. This is cultivating awareness toward yourself. When you cultivate awareness toward another person, it's called compassion.

For successful meditation, you need the view and the practice.

The view is the method and the goal. The practice is the actual doing.

First, realize that dukkha, suffering, happens to everyone. Also consider dukkha as being out of sync, discomfort, disconnection, dis-ease. This is Buddhism's First Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth states that dukkha is caused by attachment, aversion, ignorance, resistance to change.

The Third Noble Truth states that suffering can be avoided. One of the methods to avoid suffering is meditation.

We already have what we need. We just need to know how to access it. Start where you are.

The path we will use is samatha, calm abiding.

The fruition of the practice will be strength, stability, and clarity of the mind.

Samatha is the baseline for further meditation practice.