

How to Become a

Great Yoga Teacher

Without
Spending a **Dime**
on Teacher Training

BY Mara Colbert



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Mara Colbert

www.yogateachertraining4free.com

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Introduction

There is no doubt about it, yoga changes people's lives for the better. People who practice yoga report less stress and anxiety, relief from physical symptoms including back pain and arthritis, faster recovery from injury, and increased connection to their spiritual life. And if you are like me, you love your experience of yoga so much that you desire to share it

with others by becoming a teacher. But as you may have learned, yoga teacher training is expensive! Teacher training courses can run anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,000, and for a fledgling yoga teacher who may not even know where their first job will come from, this can be daunting. Many teacher training courses claim to provide you with a “certification” or prepare you to claim the designation of a Yoga Alliance Registered Teacher at 200, 300, or 500 hours. But I am here to share with you everything you need to know to become a GREAT yoga teacher, without attending an expensive teacher training course, and without registering with the Yoga Alliance. In the following pages I will share with you:

- Who I am and why I am qualified to teach you how to become a yoga teacher
- Why you do not need to spend a dime on a yoga teacher training program
- What the Yoga Alliance (YA) is, and is not, and why you do not need to be “certified” to teach yoga anyway
- What makes a GREAT yoga teacher
- The various yoga lineages and styles
- Essential yoga history and philosophy, as it applies to teaching a yoga class today
- The most important and fundamental yoga postures, breathing exercises, and alignment instructions
- Sequencing your classes (what postures you teach and in what order)
- Communication skills
- Hands-on adjustments and touch
- Creating the appropriate ambience, or mood, for your classes
- Business skills, or how to find teaching jobs

Who I am and why I am qualified to write this book

I have studied and practiced yoga since 1998 and have made a life of

teaching yoga for the past decade. My interest in the full and varied tradition of hatha yoga has always led me to pursue studies in many forms and lineages, including ashtanga, vinyasa, Iyengar, Anusara, and Bikram. I am an Experienced Registered Yoga Teacher with Yoga Alliance (YA) at the 200-hour level (E-RYT) having received a “certification” with a concentration in ashtanga yoga at Yoga Yoga Teacher Training in Austin, Texas.

Aside from my teaching certification, I have attended teacher trainings with Shiva Rea and Baron Baptiste and have had the good fortune of learning from many master teachers, including Rodney Yee, Ana Forrest, Seane Corn, John Friend, Desiree Rumbaugh, Christina Sell, John Shumacher, Aadil Palkivala, and Tias Little.

After teaching at several of the best-known yoga studios in Austin, I moved to my hometown of Kansas City in 2004 and opened a yoga studio called Inspire Yoga. Over the next few years, Inspire Yoga became one of Kansas City's most well-loved and respected yoga studios with some of the best instructors in town. In 2010 I merged Inspire Yoga with another great yoga studio, Yoga Gallery, and am now happily teaching classes to an amazing group of dedicated students alongside the best teachers in the area.

I teach what I consider *eclectic* hatha yoga, and depending on the class, it may be called yoga, yoga flow, hatha yoga, hatha flow, or vinyasa flow. While I have studied many of the major yoga “styles” in depth, I am not married to any one style, and I use what speaks to me and has worked for me over the years. My teaching is informed by the wisdom imparted from the teachers I have learned from, and from my own practice. My in-depth knowledge of various styles of hatha yoga, as well as a thorough understanding of anatomy, physiology, and the strengths and limitations of individual bodies, allows me to tailor each class to suit the participants. Students in my classes receive individual attention, as well as the respect and space they require to discover themselves through the practice of yoga.

Why you do not need to spend a dime on a yoga

teacher training program

Yoga instructors do not necessarily need to be “certified” or to have any particular credentials to teach yoga. Unlike massage therapists, chiropractors, or public school teachers, there are no licensing requirements to practice. Therefore, it is not required to have a particular certificate or even to have gone to an organized teacher training program in order to be a successful and even a great yoga teacher. Don't get me wrong, I am a huge fan of teacher training. I am by no means suggesting that one should not attend teacher training IF their lifestyle and finances support it. I have the utmost respect for quality teacher training programs. I attribute my teacher training at Yoga Yoga in Austin, Texas, for a large part of my ability to be a great teacher. And if you are passionate about a particular style of yoga, such as Iyengar, Ashtanga, Anusara, or Bikram yoga, to name a few, and if you want to specifically teach that style of yoga, then you will need to attend their rigorous teacher trainings and receive a certification from that school to teach in their style. However, if you, like me, have an eclectic approach to yoga, and you want to teach classes called “yoga,” “hatha yoga,” “vinyasa,” “yoga flow,” “power yoga,” “basic yoga,” etc., then you do not need a certificate from a particular school. And you do not need to be registered with Yoga Alliance (YA), or have the letters RYT (Registered Yoga Teacher) after your name.

What the Yoga Alliance is and is not

Yoga Alliance (YA) is the national education and support organization for yoga teachers in the United States. Their stated intention is to ensure that there is a thorough understanding of the benefits of yoga, that the teachers of yoga value its history and traditions, and that the public can be confident of the quality and consistency of instruction.

In September 1999, YA established a national Yoga Teachers' Registry to recognize and promote teachers with training that meets their minimum standards. Teachers who meet these standards are eligible to register as

Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT's). In 2005 they began recognizing and registering teachers with significant teaching experience in addition to training. These teachers can register as Experienced Registered Yoga Teachers (E-RYT's). (see <https://yogaalliance.org>)

So you can see here that YA does not “certify” teachers, but allows teachers to pay money to “register” – like a directory.

I am not knocking YA, I respect what they do, and I proudly display their letters after my name (in the years that I have chosen to send in my payment to be in the registry). But the vast majority of yoga teachers I know do NOT have the letters RYT after their names. And they are some of the best and most well-respected teachers, both in my local community and nationally, and truly some of the best in the world. Over the past eight years I have lived in my hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, and for six of those years I owned and ran a yoga studio. I can tell you that of the dozen or so yoga teachers I employed over that time, less than one-third of them were RYT's. Of the master teachers listed in my bio, I'm fairly certain none of them register with the YA. Most of the well-known yoga teachers that you see gracing the covers of yoga magazines also do not display the letters RYT after their names, as they do not need them. Their teaching and experience speaks for itself.

When I look at a teacher's credentials, what I want to know is how much experience they have had, how long they have practiced yoga, who have been their main teachers, how much they love yoga, and what kind of person are they? I am much more likely to hire a current or former student of mine with minimal teacher training, whom I know to be genuine and passionate about yoga, and to have a strong and aware sense of their own practice, than someone I do not know who has a certification and an RYT after their name.

Chapter 1: What makes a great yoga teacher: self-practice and self-mastery

What you do need to be a great yoga teacher is a solid personal practice

of yoga.

You need to have been practicing yoga regularly, as in 4-6 times per week, for at least one to two years, if not more. You need to have a genuine love of yoga, and of learning about yoga. You should be attending class regularly, as well as practicing at home on your own. Teaching yoga is more about having a solid understanding of yoga in your own body, than it is about memorizing information, names of postures, or any other external knowledge of yoga. Yoga is experiential and you have to have some degree of mastery in your own practice, in your own body first.

That being said, mastery has little to do with how impressive your postures appear from the outside, or how many advanced postures you can do. Mastery is having overcome obstacles and limitations of your own, through dedicated practice, and having experienced progress and transformation. It is my belief that a teacher does not need to be omniscient – meaning she does not need to know everything about yoga and does not need to have mastered many advanced postures. The teacher needs to know a little bit more than his or her students. (In the case that there are advanced students and/or yoga teachers present in your classes, you do not need to act like you know more than they do, you just need to be yourself and do your best.)

When I was a beginning teacher, I felt that as long as I stayed one or two steps ahead of my students in terms of information about the yoga practice, I was in a good place. It is your love of yoga that will inspire students, not your vast knowledge.

Find a mentor

You also need to have a good relationship with at least one or two qualified and experienced teachers who know you, know your yoga practice, and support you in becoming a teacher. When your teacher knows you have an interest in becoming a teacher some day, chances are that teacher will pay some special attention to you, making extra effort to give you alignment instruction, adjustments, and bits of information that will be useful to you. They will make it their project to guide you and

support you and help you overcome your obstacles, gaining a deep understanding of the yoga process, and achieve some level of mastery.

Get thee to a yoga workshop

A great yoga teacher attends yoga workshops as often as possible. When your yoga studio brings in guest teachers and offers workshops, you are the first to sign up. Workshops are intensive settings that address specific issues in yoga. They may emphasize certain postures or types of postures, such as inversions, backbends, or hip openers, or they may have a philosophical theme such as *seva* (service) or *sankalpa* (sacred intention). They may introduce you to an aspect of yoga, such as meditation, *pranayama* (breathing exercises), or *mudra* (symbolic gestures, usually of the hands and fingers). Workshops are invaluable opportunities to learn about yoga, break things down, observe and share with other students, practice with partners, ask questions, discuss topics, and gain exposure to master teachers. Workshops are far less expensive than teacher training and offer invaluable exposure to the depths, details, and intricacies of the varied field of yoga. As you gain knowledge and information in workshops, you cultivate a sort of yoga “toolkit” that you can pull from when you begin teaching.

I have learned more about teaching yoga from workshops I have attended than from any formal teacher training I have taken.

Cultivate a peer group or cohort

If you are fortunate, you may find that you make “yoga friends” through your studio or the workshops you attend. One of the most fulfilling aspect of an organized teacher training program for those who have the time and financial resources to attend one, is that you have a teacher training community and ready-made guinea pigs to practice your new skills with. And this is something that will be harder to cultivate if you do your “teacher training” on your own. But if there are a few other students, or even just one, who is also interested in teaching yoga, you can create a

cohort. That may mean you will go through this book together and discuss it as you go. It may mean you can use each other for practice teaching, especially for working on alignment cues and hands-on adjustments. It will definitely mean you will feel supported and part of a community.

Chapter 2: The basics: essential yoga breathing, postures, and alignment

Yogic breathing

Westerners tend to emphasize the inhale rather than the exhale. In yogic breathing, the exhale precedes the inhale, and it is necessary to have taken a complete exhale before the inhale can take place.

There are four different methods of breathing:

- Abdominal, diaphragmatic, or low breathing
- Intercostal or middle breathing
- Clavicular or upper breathing
- Complete yogic breathing is a combination of all three

Pranayama

Pranayama is yogic breathwork, or breathing exercises. *Pranayama* specifically translates as control or lengthening of the life force energy, or *prana*. *Prana* is life force, energy, or breath. There are many different pranayama techniques used for various purposes, but you do not need extensive knowledge of any of them to teach a yoga class.

Some schools of yoga, such as Iyengar and Sivananda, teach *pranayama* separately from *asana*. Some styles teach them simultaneously, such as in Ashtanga, power, or vinyasa, where *ujjayi breathing is practiced throughout, and the breath and movements are synchronized. (In*

Ashtanga yoga more advanced pranayama exercises are taught to advanced students, and practiced separately from asana.)

Essentially, *pranayama*, like *asana*, is something you will learn from a qualified teacher and only pass on to your students when you have mastered it yourself. Pranayama is powerful and should be practiced and taught appropriately. You may use a book, such as Iyengar's *Light on Pranayama*, and practice on your own. But do not attempt to teach anything you have only read about. You must have a personal experience of it before sharing it with students.

Ujjayi pranayama

The Sanskrit word *ujjayi* means victorious, and is derived from the roots *ud*, or bondage, and *ji*, or conquer. It is therefore the *pranayama* that frees us from bondage, and also refers to having conquered, or mastered, one's own energy and power. It is practiced by toning the back of the throat and breathing as though through a small hole on the base of your throat, instead of through your nostrils. Both the inhale and the exhale are even and long, deep and controlled. It creates a soft snoring sound, and when practiced correctly there will be a simultaneous contraction of the abdomen. The contraction in the throat and abdomen allow for the breath to be very long, slow, and deep. *Ujjayi* is calming and heating, and is used to soothe the nervous system and the mind. *Ujjayi* can be practiced alone, either sitting or lying down, or can be coordinated with postures, as it is in Ashtanga, vinyasa, or yoga flow, where the marriage of breath with movement promotes a deep level of awareness and gracefulness, builds heat, and cultivates stamina.

Yoga postures or asanas

Asana means posture, or seat. I believe that technically it has to do with how we sit or stand so that energy flows most effectively, as in "she has good posture," although it has come to be synonymous with the practice of yoga postures or yoga poses. The terms posture and pose may be used

interchangeably, but either one is preferable to “yoga position” or “yoga move.”

Various schools and styles of yoga emphasize different principles of alignment in *asana*, as well as different sequencing. Some styles are very alignment-intensive, while others focus on other areas of the practice. I tend to teach quite a bit of alignment in my classes, as I have a lot of Iyengar and Anusara yoga in my background and training. It is my opinion that if you, like me, are particularly interested in alignment, anatomy, and the therapeutic aspects of the yoga practice, you will want to have some Iyengar and/or Anusara yoga in your toolkit.

Based on my experience and conceptualization of postural alignment, there are some basic principles of alignment that are universal and may apply to all yoga postures:

- Foundation: the body part that is on the ground (feet, knees, hands, forearms, or head) sets the foundation for the rest of the pose, and must be placed with intention and attention to proper alignment.
- Rooting/recoiling: root down into the earth in order to lengthen and/or rise up
- Expansion/contraction: energy moves outward expansively from the core of the posture to the extremities; and also draws inward muscularly from the surface to the core.
- Shoulder engagement: the shoulder blades are firmly on the back, supporting the opening of the heart center and the lift of the chest.
- Shins in/thighs out: the thigh bones are drawn back and apart, while the shin bones move forward and in. These actions open the hips and pelvis and stabilize the knees.
- The knee caps are drawn up, but not “locked” or hyper-extended.
- The tailbone is down and in, or “scooped.”
- The lower belly is engaged.
- The sides of the neck are long.
- The sides of the torso, or “side-body”, are long.
- In standing poses, as a general rule of thumb, when the knee is bent, the weight should be on the heel of the foot; when the

leg is straight, the weight is in the ball of the foot, or the big toe mound. These actions help protect the knee.

- Reach evenly through the “four corners” of the feet, whether you are standing on them, or not. So in seated postures, or when a leg is up in the air, the toes are spread and energetic, and there is expansion through both the heels and the balls of the feet.
- *Drishti*: Sanskrit for “gaze” or “point of focus,” each *asana* has a prescribed *drishti*, such as the tip of the nose, the third eye (point between the eyebrows), the hand, big toe, or simply “side” or “up.” These are not set in stone, and you may experiment with different *drishtis*, but they help the practitioner remain centered, balanced, and focused.
- Breath: the breath is always free and unrestrained, in and out through the nose. Never hold the breath during posture practice.

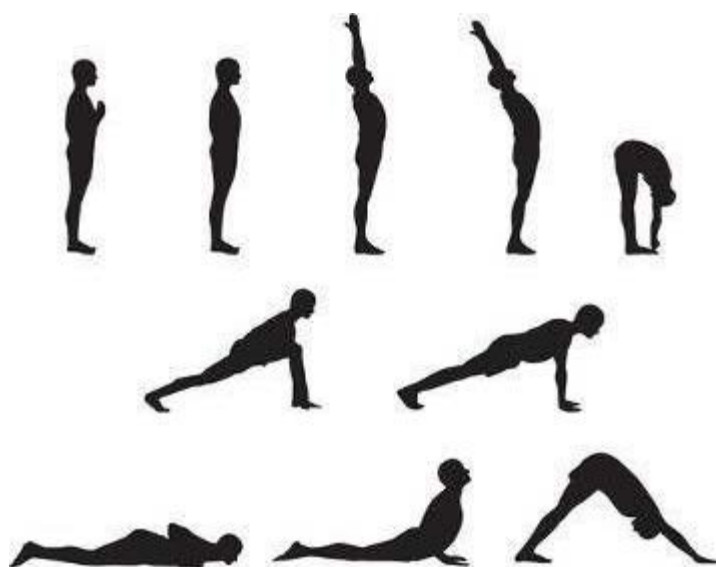
As previously mentioned, *it is essential that you have been attending classes and practicing regularly with at least one qualified teacher for a minimum of 1-2 years.* That is where you will learn postures and alignment and where you will experience and master them in your own body. It will also be helpful for you to choose some books on yoga postures to use as reference for your teaching. You may choose books based on your specific yoga style, but there are a few that I recommend as general references: *Light on Yoga* and *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health*, both by B.K.S. Iyengar; *30 Essential Yoga Poses* by Judith Lasater; *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga*; *Power Yoga* and *Beyond Power Yoga*, both by Beryl Bender Birch; *Journey Into Power* by Baron Baptiste; and *Moving Into Stillness* by Erich Schiffmann.

There are hundreds of yoga postures, and thousands of variations on those, not to mention all the ones that have been made up in recent years and are regularly practiced now. *This book is not intended to teach you how to practice or teach yoga postures. This will not be an exhaustive study of yoga asana, but an overview.* What I will do here is outline the basic families of yoga postures as well as their perceived benefits and possible contraindications, with examples of a few postures of each type.

I will point out in bold type the specific points of alignment you should look out for when practicing or teaching these postures, in order to avoid injury. You might like to refer to Iyengar's *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health* for more complete examples of health benefits and contraindications. For postures that need to be practiced on both right and left sides, I refer here to the right leg/arm, or front leg/arm, so make certain you practice or teach both sides!

The postures:

Surya Namaskara



Surya Namaskara or Sun Salutations are usually practiced at or near the beginning of a session and are intended to warm up the body and prepare it for deeper postures. There are many ways to practice *Surya Namaskara*, but the basic sequence is below. The postures correspond to the above graphic: 1-5, top row left-right; 6-7, middle left-right; 8-10, bottom left-right.

1. *Tadasana* (Mountain): standing at attention, feet planted either together or hip-width, spine aligned, gaze straight ahead. Hands either in *anjali mudra* (prayer position) or
2. Hands down at your side.
3. *Urdhva Hastasana* (Arms Up): Inhale the arms up, lift the chest, and look up at your thumbs. You can bring your palms to touch, or keep arms shoulder-width apart.
4. You may choose to arch back in a gentle backbend. (In the

illustration above, the guy is bending way back. He is just a cartoon, **but your actual students may hurt themselves if they bend so far back before getting warmed up!** You may have them just stand tall and take their arms straight up.)

5. *Uttanasana* (Standing Forward Bend, or literally “Intense Stretch Pose”): Exhale as you bend forward from the hips and bring hands to the floor beside the feet. You may need to bend your knees. I prefer to touch just the fingertips rather than the whole hand. Keep hips over the heels, do not let them sway back. Gaze at the third eye. **Look out for rounding in the back—the bend comes rather from the crease of the hips. Knees may need to bend if the student has tight hamstrings.**

6. *High Lunge or Runner’s Lunge** (no Sanskrit name, just use “Lunge”): Step one foot to the back of your mat, keep the front leg at 90 degrees, weight on the heel, back knee lifted and back toes turned under, stay on fingertips. Gaze straight ahead. You may also choose to drop the knee down in *Anjaneyasana* (low lunge), getting a deeper stretch on the front of the back leg. You may stay on the tips of the toes, or drop to the top of the foot. I prefer to stay on fingertips rather than flat palms so there is space between the torso and the bent leg. **Keep the front heel grounded and do not over-bend the knee.**

*You may choose to step or jump back to plank and skip the lunge.

7. Plank Pose (this is another one of the postures that does not seem to have a Sanskrit name, just use “plank”): In Plank, hands are flat on the floor, not cupped or in fists, and directly beneath shoulders. **Use your core strength to draw up the belly, tuck your tailbone and your front ribs in, and soften between the shoulder blades.** Extend energy out through the heels and the crown of the head. Gaze at tip of the nose or straight ahead.

8. *Ashtanga Namaskara* (Knees-Chest-Chin): As the name suggests, drop your knees, chest, and chin down, gazing straight ahead. The buttocks are lifted for a gentle arch in the spine.

(8a) Another option here is *Chaturanga Dandasana* (Four-Limbed Staff, or

low push-up):



Bend your elbows and shift slightly forward as you lower down until your upper arms are parallel to the floor and elbows bent to 90 degrees. **Keep the heads of your arm bones up away from the earth so you do not dump into the shoulders.**

9. *Bhujangasana* (Cobra): Keeping the legs and hips on the floor, point the toes straight back, press the hands down to lift the chest and draw the shoulders back. The chest lifts so the shoulders do not scrunch to the ears, but the arms may or may not come to straight. The pubic bone should remain on the floor. Gaze forward or up, keeping the neck long.

(9a) *Urdvha Mukha Svanasana* (Upward Facing Dog, or "Up Dog"):



May be practiced in lieu of cobra. Press the arms straight, roll to the tops of the feet, and lift the chest up till the legs and hips are off the ground. Only the tops of the feet and palms of the hands are on the floor, the arms are vertical and the chest lifts up so that the shoulders are not up

around the ears. **In both Cobra and Up Dog encourage students to stay engaged in the belly and to pull the shoulder blades into the back, so as to stabilize the lower back and open the upper back.**

10. *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Facing Dog, or “Down Dog”): From cobra, or upward facing dog, lift the hips high so that only the hands and feet are on the ground, and the body creates the shape of an upside down “V”. Hands are at shoulder-width and feet at hips-width apart. Press strongly through the whole hand to lengthen the spine and lift the hips, and press the thighs back to stretch the legs. The legs will eventually straighten, and the heels may come to the floor. Gaze to the floor or to the navel. **Look out for too much pressure in the wrist—the weight should be in the knuckles of the index fingers and thumbs. The shoulder blades need to slide down onto the back in order to keep the upper trapezius muscles from scrunching around the neck.**

You may finish the Sun Salutation by stepping up to repeat the lunge, or simply stepping/hopping to the front of the mat. Repeat *Uttanasana*, *Urdhva Hastasana*, and *Tadasana* to complete the Sun Salutation. Repeat the Sun Salutation 3-5 times. You may also incorporate these transitions between postures within a flow-style or vinyasa practice.

Standing poses

Standing poses are typically practiced at the beginning of practice, or for the first half or so of the class. These active postures tone the cardiovascular system. They are warming and strengthening for the leg muscles, joints, and spine, preparing the body for deeper work that may occur in the seated, supine, or inverted postures to follow. As a teacher you have the opportunity and the responsibility to teach basic alignment actions in standing postures, and it is essential to let students know exactly where to put their feet and whether to bend or straighten the leg(s). **The feet are the foundation of the standing postures, and the length and width of their stance, and the angles of the feet, determine the alignment of the rest of the joints of the legs and**

spine in the pose. Barring serious injury, there are no contraindications to standing poses. Some of the basic standing postures include:

Utthita Trikonasana (Triangle):



Usually just called *Trikonasana*, Triangle is practiced with the feet about one leg length, or 3-4 feet apart. In Iyengar yoga the stance is typically quite long, while in Ashtanga it is much shorter. The stance is something you will experiment with in your own practice and learn to adapt for individual students as appropriate. The front foot is turned 90 degrees, or parallel to the long side of the mat, while the back foot is turned in slightly, parallel to the short side of the mat. Keeping both legs straight, bend at the hip crease and put your hand down either next to the front foot, on the floor or a block, or on the foot or ankle. The top arm goes straight up and you gaze up to your top hand. **Look out for the angles of the student's feet—the front foot may turn in slightly, and the back foot might turn out, either one of which can compromise the knee. The entire leg, foot, knee, and hip, should rotate together at the same angle.**

Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved, or Twisted Triangle):



The stance is slightly shorter than *Utthita Trikonasana* with the hips squared to the front leg and the back foot turned in slightly. With both legs straight, if your right foot is the front foot, place the left hand next to the front foot. Usually the hand goes to the outside of the foot, but beginners or tight folks may use the inside of the foot or a block. Take the right arm straight up, stacking the right shoulder over the left, and look up to the top hand. The left side spinal muscles power the twist to the right (and vice versa when you change sides.) **Look out for the front hip swinging out to the side – encourage your students to draw the outer hip back in line with the foot; also notice the angle and foundation of the back heel, which should be firmly grounded at an angle that is comfortable and does not put stress on the ankle.**

Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I):



From high lunge turn your back foot down so the heel is on the floor and the foot is at an angle that feels comfortable in the ankle. Keeping the

back leg completely straight, the hips squared forward, and the front knee bent to 90 degrees, raise the torso upright and stretch the arms overhead. Look forward or up to the hands, placing the palms together or keeping the hands at shoulder-width apart, gaze straight ahead or up to the thumbs. **Look out for the front knee, which should stack right over the heel. If the student's stance is too short, the knee may go past the heel, compromising the knee.**

Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II):



With legs wide apart, turn the front foot out 90 degrees and the back foot in just a bit. Keeping the back leg completely straight, bend the front knee to 90 degrees and raise the arms up to shoulder height, gazing over the front hand. Keep both sides of the body long and the tailbone scooping. Gaze over the front hand. **As in Warrior I, the front knee should stack right over the heel.**

Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle):



Usually called just *Parsvakonasana*, or Side Angle. Set up your stance like

Warrior II with the front leg bent to a full 90 degrees, and with the knee stacked over the heel. Place the front hand to the floor either inside or outside of the foot, or on a block, and take the top arm at an angle over the ear so that the whole side of the body makes a diagonal line. Look to the top hand. As a modification you may place your bent elbow on the knee or thigh without putting a hand to the floor. **Look out for the hips popping up and the shoulders dumping down. The energy of the pose must be grounded in the legs, and reaching upward through the spine and raised arm. As in Warrior, keep the bent knee right over the heel.**

Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (revolved side angle):



Sometimes just called prayer's twist. Start in high lunge, either turning the back heel down or staying on the ball of the back foot. Raise the torso to upright, and placing the hands in prayer position, twist toward the front leg, hooking the elbow outside the knee. Use the front leg and arm against each other as leverage to twist. Turn and look up, remaining in prayer, or putting the lower hand on the floor outside of the front foot, and lifting the top arm up, stretch the fingers and gaze to the top hand. **The twisting action in this pose can throw off the stability of the back leg and knee. Work to hug the back leg shin in and keep the knee aligned. A gentler option is to keep the back knee on the floor. In the photo above, the model would benefit from turning more and bringing her sternum to her thumbs, lifting her side body off her thigh, and creating a deeper twist.**

Parsvottanasana (this is one posture I never use the English name for, because it is something like "to the side intense stretch pose"):



With legs about three or so feet apart (slightly smaller stance than Warrior I), square the hips forward, keep the back heel on the floor with the foot slightly turned in. Keep both legs straight and, hinging at the hips rather than the waist, fold over the front leg. Traditionally the arms and hands are in “reversed prayer” behind the back, but you can also place hands on the floor on either side of the front foot or on blocks. The face may come to the leg, or keep the head up, in line with the spine, gazing at the big toe. **Keep the hips level and the back heel grounded. There is a modification, often called Pyramid, where you turn onto the ball of the back foot and lift the heel over the toes. This may help keep the hips level, but can sacrifice balance and stability, so I typically only teach the Pyramid variation with fingertips on the floor next to the front foot.**

Prasarita Padottanasa (Wide Leg Standing Forward Bend):



Stand with feet one leg length apart, and keeping feet parallel, hinge from the hips and touch the floor. This posture has several hand/arm

variations, including hands to floor, holding big toes or heels, hands clasped behind back to stretch shoulders, and hands staying on hips. **The distance between the legs varies depending on one's height and flexibility. If the head is very easily to the floor, shorten the stance; if the spine is round and the head is far from the floor, try a wider stance.**

Balance poses

Standing balances are typically included with standing poses near the beginning of practice. They encourage stability and focus and help to balance the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

Vriksasana (tree):



Stand on one foot, and bending the other leg, place the foot at the very top of the standing leg's inner thigh, with the thigh bone and the foot pressing into each other. Encourage the bent knee to move back, and scoop the tailbone. Hands in prayer or over head, gaze straight ahead. **Some students may not be able to get the foot to the top of the thigh. Do not allow them to place it at the knee, as pressure on the knee can be damaging. Some students can place the foot on**

the shinbone instead, or practice by a wall so that one hand is used for balance on the wall, while the other holds the foot in place at the upper thigh.

Garudasana (eagle):



Standing on one leg, bend deeply at the knee and wrap the other leg around at the knee, and again at the ankle, tucking the top of the foot behind the standing leg ankle or calf. Wrap one arm around the other at the elbow, and again at the wrist, placing the hands together as well as you can. *Garudasana* works all the major joints of the body, and compresses the lymph nodes in the armpits and groins of the legs, encouraging detoxification. Repeat on both sides. **It is more important to work into the wrap at the knees and elbows , so that the lymph nodes get squeezed, than to wrap at the wrist or ankle. Look out for students bypassing the first wrap in favor of the second, which will prevent them from receiving the benefits of the posture and may inhibit them from progressing in the pose.**

Utthita Hasta Padangustasana A (Extended Hand to Big Toe):



Standing on one leg, pick up the other by holding the big toe with the first two fingers and thumb, and extend the leg to straight, at hip height or higher. Stay upright with the opposite hand on the hip, gaze forward or to the big toe.

Utthita Hasta Padangustasana B:



From *Utthita Hasta Padangustasana A* take the leg out to the side and turn your head to gaze over the opposite shoulder. **For both A and B, it**

is essential to keep the standing leg straight with the thigh pressed back. If the student cannot straighten the lifted leg all the way, encourage them to practice it either holding the bent knee, or with the knee bent, but still holding the big toe (or use a strap).

Ardha Chandrasana (half moon):



This pose is typically entered from Triangle. Bending the front knee and hopping the back foot in closer, place the bottom hand or fingertips (or use a block) about a foot forward and caddy-corner from the pinky toe, then come up to balance, with the back leg strong and straight at hip height. Take the top arm up and gaze up at the top hand. Take care that that bottom leg does not start to turn in, but keep the foot and knee pointing straight ahead. If balance is challenged, look straight ahead or down to the floor. **Pay attention to the alignment of the standing leg and foot, both of which should face straight ahead.**

Natarajasana (dancer pose):



Take one arm up over head, and the other behind you to grab your foot from the inside of the ankle. As you kick strongly back and up through the back leg, the back will arch and the chest will come forward. The gaze is straight ahead or to the front hand. **Make sure the front arm stays above parallel in order for the spine to backbend, rather than simply leaning forward.**

Seated forward bends

In forward bends the back body is stretched and the abdominal organs are compressed, encouraging proper spinal alignment as well as digestive health. As the organs relax, the nervous system becomes rested, lowering pulse and blood pressure. This relieves stress and increases feelings of health and well being. **Forward bending may be contraindicated for bulging or herniated discs in the lumbar spine, sacroiliac joint pain, and sciatica. Take care that students bend from the creases of the hips, never from the waist or middle back.**

Paschimottanasana (Western Intense Stretch, a.k.a. Seated Forward Bend):



Sitting upright on your sitting bones, bend from the hip creases, not the middle back, and grab your toes or feet. Lengthening the spine, lean over the legs, and eventually take the face to the shins. **Do not take the face to the knees as it rounds the spine and may damage the lower back. If it is impossible to fold from the hip creases, elevate the hips onto a folded blanket to encourage lift in the lower back.**

Janu Sirsanasana (Head to Knee Pose):



Bend the right leg back to about 90 degrees with the heel in the groin of the same leg, left leg is straight. Turning the torso toward the straight left leg, reach out to grab the foot and fold over the leg. As with *Paschimottanasana*, you won't actually bring your head right on to the knee, but beyond it to the shin. **Look out for knee pain in the bent knee. If the knee is a problem, you may support it with a block.**

Upavista Konasana (Wide-Angle Forward Bend):



Spread the legs as wide as you can (or if very flexible, stop at about 90 degrees apart or so – any more is the side split, a slightly different pose) and sit upright on the sitting bones, or fold forward. **Take care that the thigh bones are rolling inward toward the floor, rather than outward. The knees and toes should point straight up to the ceiling.**

Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle):



Sit with feet together and knees out to the sides. Pressing either the soles of the feet or the outside edges of the feet together, drop the thighs and knees toward the floor. Sit upright or fold forward over the feet. **If hip or inner thigh tightness prevents the knees from dropping to the floor, do not fold forward. Remain upright until the thighs open up and the knees drop down.**

Twists

Twists increase spinal health while squeezing the pelvic and abdominal organs, flushing them with blood. Increased suppleness and blood flow to the spine raise energy levels and encourage detoxification. **Twists may be contraindicated during severe headache or migraine, and some teachers may discourage twisting during menstruation. Deep twists should be avoided during pregnancy.**

Ardha Matseyendrasana (half spinal twist):



While sitting to the right of the feet, take your left foot and cross it over the right knee, placing the sole of the foot on the floor outside that knee. Twist to the left, supporting yourself from behind with the left hand on the floor, and reaching the right arm up and around to the outside of the left knee to create further leverage for the twist. Look over the left shoulder. **During pregnancy, modify by twisting away from the top leg, rather than toward it. This will allow for a spinal twist without the abdominal compression.**

Back bends

All back bends stimulate the central nervous system, stimulate and energize the body, strengthen and mobilize the spine, and stretch the front body. Deeper backbends such as *Urdhva Dhanurasana* may be contraindicated for those with high or low blood pressure.

Bhujangasana (Cobra):



As described above, in Cobra the legs stay on the floor and the upper body curls up. The height of the upper body may vary from quite low, to all the way up with arms straight, depending on spinal flexibility and strength. **Take care to anchor the feet, legs, and tailbone, and to lift and open the chest, rather than to bend only from the lower back. Keep the shoulder blades on the back and the collar bones broad. The gaze may be forward or up, so long as the neck is long and not compressed.**

Ustrasana (camel):



Stand on your knees, at hip width apart, with toes pointing straight back behind you, or toes turned under so heels are elevated. Pressing your tailbone down and forward, lift the belly and the chest, taking arms

behind you to grab the heels. Keep the hips right over the knees and drop your head back. **Make sure the hips do not drop back behind the knees.**

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (bridge pose):



Lying on your back with knees bent, place your feet flat on the floor near the buttocks at hips width apart. Keep arms down by your sides and push off the arms and feet to lift the hips up high until you are resting on the feet, shoulders, and back of the head, **but not the neck**. You may choose to interlace the fingers together behind your back and roll the arms and shoulders together behind you. **No part of the spine should be touching the floor. Take care that knees stay hip width apart and are right above the heels, feet parallel.**

Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow, a.k.a. Wheel):



Lying on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor near the buttocks, raise your arms, bend your elbows, and place your hands on the floor by your ears, fingers pointing in toward the shoulders. Both feet and

hands should be wide apart. On an inhale lift your hips and press down on your hands, placing the top of the head on the floor briefly. Next, on an inhale, straighten your arms, lifting your head, and raising the hips high. With practice you can walk your hands and feet closer together. Tuck your chin and reverse the steps to come down. **Wheel should not be practiced until the shoulders are open and prepared. Shoulder blades must stay on the back and arms must stack right over the wrists. If there is wrist or lower back pain, look to the shoulders as the area to work on.**

Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One Leg King Pigeon):



There are several variations on this deep back bending posture, the most common being seated with the front leg bent and the heel close in to the groin, with the back leg extended behind you on the floor. Bending the back knee, reach back with one or both hands, puff up the chest like a pigeon, rotate the shoulders so the elbows point straight up, and bring the head back and the foot forward till they touch. Perhaps the best known variation on this is called *Eka Pada Rajakapotasana preparation* (or Pigeon prep) where the front leg is bent, the back leg is straight, and you either stay upright or fold forward to stretch and open the hip:



Look out for the weight shifting onto the front hip, and the back leg becoming ungrounded. The weight should be evenly distributed between the back of the front leg and the front of the back leg.

Inversions

Inverted postures flush the brain, heart, and lungs with blood, and allow blood and fluid to flow out of the legs and feet. They restore balance to the subtle and physical bodies. These postures are contraindicated when glaucoma or detached retina is present, due to increased pressure in the head, and not recommended for those with high blood pressure due to increased pressure in the chest. **Some systems of yoga suggest that inversions should also be avoided during menstruation or pregnancy.** I do not personally believe this, but I feel it is necessary to inform students so they can make the decision for themselves. It is important for yoga teachers to master these postures before teaching them, and to have experience with spotting and assisting. The postures themselves are not dangerous, and should not cause fear of injury, but students will likely have anxiety around falling.

Sirsasana (Headstand, a.k.a. the “king of all asanas”):



Kneeling on the ground, place your elbows at shoulder width apart on the floor and clasp the fingers to the webbing. Place your head down inside the clasped fingers, somewhere between the hairline and the crown of the head. With more of the weight in your arms than in your head, lift up to the toes and walk them in close to the elbows, then while inhaling, take the legs up either one at a time or both together to balance. Keep tone in the legs and fan your toes out. Beginners may choose to practice near a wall. **Look out for too much weight in the head, or for placement of the head too far back toward the crown. Make sure to properly align the neck and shoulders by putting the head down in between the hairline and the crown, and keeping the shoulder blades on the back.**

Halasana (Plow):



Lying on your back, take the legs up and overhead, touching the toes to the floor. Roll the arms and shoulders together underneath you, and bend at the elbows, placing the hands on the back for support. If the toes touch the floor easily, tighten the knees and lift the backs of the legs toward the ceiling, while interlacing the fingers, straightening the arms, and pressing the wrists into the floor.

Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand, a.k.a. the “queen of all asanas”):



From plow pose support the back with the hands and while inhaling, take the legs straight up to the sky, toning the legs and fanning the toes. Maintain deep breaths while holding the posture. As in bridge pose, the arms, shoulders, and back of the head are on the floor, but not the neck.

In Plow and Shoulderstand, make sure the back of the neck is lifted, not pressed into the floor. Use one or two folded blankets under the shoulders to keep the neck lifted.

Urdvha Vriksasana (Upward Tree, a.k.a. Handstand):



Place hands shoulder width apart on the floor, as in downward facing dog. Looking to the fingertips, walk the feet in close until the hips are over the shoulders, then while inhaling take one at a time or both legs over head. Many students will practice this posture at the wall or with a spotter, as in the photo. **Do not spot your students in Handstand until you have learned to do so from an experienced teacher. Never allow students to spot one another unless you have instructed them specifically how to do so.**

Reclining/supine poses

Reclining postures are restful, soothing the body and mind. These postures may be sequenced at the end of practice as part of cooling down, or at the beginning to prepare the joints and relax the muscles.

Supta Padangusthasana A (Reclining Hand to Big Toe):



Lying on your back, take one leg up and grasp the big toe with the first two fingers and thumb (or use a strap or belt). Straighten the leg completely while keeping the head and shoulders on the floor. If it is impossible to straighten the leg at a minimum of a 90 degree angle, keep the bottom leg bent with the foot on the floor near the buttocks. If the top leg is straight, also straighten the bottom leg and press it into the floor.

Supta Padangusthasana B: From *Supta Padangusthasana A*, open the leg out to the side while keeping the opposite hip down and turning the head to gaze over the opposite shoulder. **Look out for the bottom leg thigh bone popping up off the floor, try to keep it grounded, or choose to bend the knee. Also take care to keep the shoulder down, and in the socket. Use a strap around the foot if the shoulder will not stay down.**

Savasana (Corpse): Typically the final posture of the practice, *Savasana* may also be practiced at the beginning to quiet the nervous system, or within the practice to rest between poses. Lie on your back with legs outstretched and palms turned up at the sides. Close the eyes and relax completely for 5-15 minutes.

A word on Sanskrit

Knowledge of the Sanskrit names of yoga *asanas* and other related terms lends credibility to a yoga teacher, especially when used sparingly and effectively. That being said, misusing or grossly mispronouncing the

Sanskrit, while going unnoticed by most students, will most certainly turn off those who do notice. If you happen to have learned yoga from a teacher or teachers who use it widely in their classes, you will have a better sense of the pronunciation than if you simply read it here or in another book. In this text I have used both the English and the Sanskrit names of poses, philosophical terms, etc. so that you can become familiar. My preference is to pepper in Sanskrit in classes, but also to use the English. Sometimes I use them together, such as “Come into to *Trikonasana*, Triangle pose”, while at other times I will use only one or the other.

Here is a short list of often-used Sanskrit words and prefixes that pertain to yoga postures and that will help you to remember some of the names:

- *Ardha* - half
- *Adho* – downward
- *Baddha* - bound
- *Eka* - one
- *Eka pada* – one foot/leg
- *Hasta* – hand
- *Kona* - angle
- *Mukha* – facing
- *Pad*- foot
- *Parivrtta* –revolved/twisted
- *Parsva/parsvo* – side
- *Urdhva* - upward
- *Uttan/ottan* – intense
- *Utthita* – extended
- *Supta* – sleeping/supine

While most students and fellow teachers will forgive minor mispronunciations of the Sanskrit, and really, all of us Westerners are pretty much butchering it, I do have a few preferences and pet peeves in terms of Sanskrit pronunciation, or mispronunciation. I will share them

with you here, along with a few other pointers:

- *Asana* has the emphasis on the first syllable, **ah**-sun-a not as-**ah**-na
- The last syllable of *asana* is a VERY short a sound which is hard for us to pronounce, especially when it is used as a suffix as in *Trikonasana* or *Savasana*. So most of us lengthen it more than we should, hence *Trikonasana*, where as some shorten it completely, as in *Trikonasan*. You have probably heard both, and it is really up to you how you use it.
- The “ch” in *chakra*, *Chakrasana*, and *Chaturanga* is a hard “ch” as in cheese, not a soft “sh” as in shower.

Chapter 3: What you need to know to sound credible and teach responsibly

A brief definition of the main types or styles of yoga

Hatha is the generic name for any yoga that emphasizes physical postures and breathing, as opposed to meditation, chanting, basket-weaving, or anything else. If you see this as a class description it may mean that it is a basic class, or that it does not follow a certain rigid system, or that the postures will be taught one at a time, as opposed to flowing into each other.

Yoga flow is much like hatha in that it may not adhere to a specific system, but the postures will be **linked together** in a choreographed flow of postures, making the class typically more athletic than a simple hatha class. (Although athletic should not be confused with advanced.) Vinyasa may be synonymous with yoga flow; however vinyasa is typically more athletic and will involve more sun salutations. The term *vinyasa* literally means sequenced in an appropriate way, but it has come to mean postures linked together with breath or postures linked to one another. In a vinyasa class the teacher may say “take a vinyasa” which typically

means to go from where you are through plank, chaturanga, upward dog or cobra, and back to downward dog.

Iyengar yoga refers to the specific system of yoga created by B.K.S. Iyengar, a major pioneer in bringing yoga to the West as a physical practice. Iyengar was a disciple of T. Krishnamacharya, and as a youth was in very poor health. He practiced yoga for many years, healing his body, and using his practice as a laboratory for understanding precisely how the yoga postures work on the physical and subtle levels of the body. His system is considered the most precise in terms of alignment principles, is known for using many yoga props, and for being quite strict and rigid.

Ashtanga yoga is a challenging and athletic system developed by the late Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, also a disciple of T. Krishnamacharya. Ashtanga yoga is the original vinyasa, or power yoga, and the form on which these two are based. There are six series of postures, each always practiced in the specific sequence, although the vast majority of practitioners will never get beyond first or second series. The sequences are always practiced with sun salutations and a sequence of standing postures at the beginning, followed by the series itself, and a closing sequence at the end. Ashtanga is traditionally taught as a self-practice learned one-on-one with your teacher; however “led” classes have become the norm.

Power yoga was originally coined as a westernized term for ashtanga yoga, although it has evolved to be more synonymous with vinyasa, or a very athletic, flowing, sun-salutation-based practice, sometimes in a hot room.

Bikram yoga is sometimes called “hot yoga” as it is practiced in a room of 95-105 °F. It is a 90-minute class, and there are 26 postures always practiced in the same order, facing a mirror. It was developed by Bikram Choudhury, and is now the only yoga system to be franchised and trademarked.

Kundalini yoga was developed by the late Yogi Bhajan of the Sikh tradition. Kundalini is a highly energetic practice consisting of “kriyas,” or sequences of asanas and breathwork, intended to raise the practitioner’s consciousness and merge it with the infinite, or divine, consciousness.

Anusara yoga was developed by John Friend, a former Iyengar teacher, who codified what are called Universal Principles of Alignment. It is a

highly precise, physical system of yoga that is also strongly tied to Tantric philosophy, with a heart-based connection to the divine. Anusara literally means "flowing with grace." Kripalu is a typically gentle form of hatha yoga focused on the subtle flow of energy, using the body as a vehicle to access spirit.

Restorative yoga is a deeply therapeutic practice that utilizes supported, gentle postures held for long periods of time in order to cultivate a deep state of relaxation.

Yin yoga is based on Taoist yoga practice. Seated or supine postures are held for a long time to get a very deep tissue stretch, often targeting the connective tissues within the joints.

The history of yoga

The Sanskrit word *yoga* has the literal meaning of "yoke," from a root *yuj* meaning to join, to unite, or to attach. It is a physical, mental, and spiritual discipline that originated in ancient India. It is said and commonly accepted that yoga is thousands of years old. Whether it is 2,000 years old or 5,000 years old, or somewhere in between is unclear. What is clear is that the yoga people practiced thousands of years ago looked very different from what we do now in your typical yoga class. In the beginning, *yogis* (people who practice yoga are called *yogis*, or *yoginis*, which is the feminine form) were ascetics who left behind material wealth, spent hours or days in meditation, and attained spiritual gifts called *siddhis* which allowed them to do crazy things like levitate or bilocate (be in two places at once), as described in Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

Within Hindu philosophy, the word *yoga* is used to refer to one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. Yoga in this sense is based on the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Patanjali's system is discussed and elaborated upon in many classical Hindu texts, and has also been influential in Buddhism and Jainism. There are many other ancient texts that discuss

yoga called the *Upanishads*, or in other words, the revealed word of God. The [Bhagavad Gita](#) is an important spiritual text which is considered an *Upanishad*, and which means *Song of God*. The *Gita*, as it is known for short, is a 700-verse Hindu scripture that is part of the ancient Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. But the *Gita* is frequently treated as a freestanding text. It is the most popular and beloved of yoga texts, and was revered by the likes of Ghandi, Albert Einstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Carl Jung.

The goals of yoga are varied and range from improving health to achieving *moksha*, or liberation from worldly suffering. But the yoga that is discussed in the ancient texts has to do with using meditation and devotion to achieve union with the divine, not with doing physical yoga postures. *Hatha yoga*, or physical yoga as we know it, is a system of yoga introduced by Yogi Swatmarama, a Hindu sage of 15th century India. The word "hatha" may esoterically be said to derive from the Sanskrit terms "ha" meaning "sun" and "tha" meaning "moon." Thus, hatha yoga is known as the branch of yoga that unites pairs of opposites referring to the positive (sun) and negative (moon) energetic currents in the body. Swatmarama introduced his system to be a stage of physical purification and bodily practices as preparation for higher meditation. It is based on [asanas](#) (postures) and [pranayama](#) (breathing techniques.) Hatha yoga became popular in the West beginning in the second half of the 20th century, and is what we now consider "yoga."

The most comprehensive text of hatha yoga is the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* compiled by Yogi Swatmarama, supposedly derived from older Sanskrit texts on yoga and on Yogi Swatmarama's own yogic experiences. It includes information about [shatkarma](#) (purification), *asana* (postures), [pranayama](#) (breathing and subtle energy control), [chakras](#) (centers of energy), [bandhas](#) (internal "locks"), [nadis](#) (channels), and [mudras](#) (symbolic gestures), among other topics.

Yoga philosophy in a nutshell

How the philosophy is applied in your teaching is up to you. While the yoga we practice now is technically hatha yoga, part of what has

made yoga so popular and beloved by so many people is the integration of the wisdom and philosophy of the various paths of yoga into the contemporary yoga experience. The best teachers weave techniques from the various areas of yoga into their classes. I love yoga philosophy and utilize its lessons in my teaching of the physical postures; some yoga teachers love chanting, and integrate that; some love the esoteric or subtle anatomy of the *chakras*, and teach them within the context of the yoga postures. This cannot be forced, but needs to arise for each teacher in an authentic way. So find what you love and integrate it as you see fit. But first, teach sound physical sequences with good alignment instruction. Themes and philosophy are advanced teaching techniques which can be overwhelming for new teachers, and should really spring forth organically from your experience as a practitioner.

Sadhana

Sadhana means practice, and refers to the specific yogic techniques or spiritual disciplines one chooses to follow on a daily basis. Each of the yogic paths may lead to the same result—union with divine consciousness—but the techniques and practices one uses to get there may differ.

The **paths of yoga** you should be familiar with are:

- *Hatha Yoga* – the yoga of physical postures and breathing exercises, as previously discussed
- *Bhakti Yoga* – the path of devotion to the divine, including prayer, ritual, and chanting
- *Karma Yoga* – the path of right action, or selfless service, focused on the causes and effects of our actions
- *Jnana Yoga* – the path of knowledge, through study, questioning, meditation, and contemplation
- *Raja Yoga* – the “royal” path, or the path of meditation or self-control

The eight limbs

Raja Yoga consists of Patanjali’s *Ashtanga Yoga*, or eight-limbed path. It

has become popular to refer to the meditative path as *Raja Yoga* so as not to confuse it with the popular physical style of *hatha yoga* that is also called *Ashtanga Yoga*. Here, the eight-limbed path refers to the *sadhana* a yogi follows to achieve *Samadhi*, or bliss, as laid out by Patanjali in *The Yoga Sutras*. The eight limbs are:

1. *Yama* – code of conduct, or self-restraint
 - *Ahimsa* – compassion or non-violence
 - *Satya* – truthfulness
 - *Asteya* – non-stealing
 - *Brahmacharya* – moderation or sexual restraint
 - *Aparigraha* – non-covetousness or non-greediness
2. *Niyama* – observances or commitments
 - *Saucha* – cleanliness or purity
 - *Santosha* – contentment
 - *Tapas* – discipline or austerity
 - *Svadhya* – self-study and study of sacred texts
 - *Ishvarapranidhana* – surrender to a higher power
3. *Asana* – posture or physical activity
4. *Pranayama* – breathing practices to integrate mind and body
5. *Pratyahara* – withdrawal of the senses
6. *Dharana* – concentration, one-pointedness of the mind
7. *Dhyana* – meditation
8. *Samadhi* – blissful awareness

The five koshas

According to yoga philosophy, human beings are made of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects that function together as a holistic system. The *koshas* are like sheaths, or layers of human consciousness. The layers are visualized like the layers of an onion, from the dense physical body, inward to the subtle levels of the emotions, mind, and spirit. The five koshas are:

1. *Annamaya kosha* – the physical self, or “food body”

2. *Pranamaya kosha* – the energy body, composed of *prana*, or vital energy
3. *Manomaya kosha* – the mind, including both the thoughts and the five senses
4. *Vijnanamaya kosha*- the intellect and ego, the knowledge of our identity or “I-ness”
5. *Anandamaya kosha* – the bliss body, a reflection of the *Atman*, or true Self

The five *koshas* operate as one system, giving rise to the self and the multitude of ways we experience being human.

The five kleshas

One should not confuse the five *koshas* with the five *kleshas*, or afflictions. The five afflictions are the causes of human suffering. They are also known as the obstacles to yoga, union with our true selves. The five *kleshas* are:

1. *Avidya* – ignorance of our true self
2. *Asmita* – ego, or “I-ness,” identification with the “false self”
3. *Raga* – attachment to pleasure (likes)
4. *Dvesa* – aversion to pain (dislikes)
5. *Abhinivesa* – fear of death/clinging to life

Prana and subtle anatomy: the Chakras, Nadis, and Vayus

Subtle anatomy refers to energetic systems and processes that correspond to the physical body, but are invisible to most humans. With regular yoga practice one may become more aware of the subtle systems in their own bodies, and yoga teachers may begin to see or sense them in their students as well. The subtle energy body is not made of blood, bone, or tissues, but of *prana*. *Prana* is that vital, life-sustaining force that enlivens all living things. *Pra* means first, and *na* means smallest, so *prana* refers to the most fundamental unit of energy that allows all mental, emotional, and physical processes to occur. When *prana* flows freely we

experience radiant health and wellbeing. When it is obstructed in a certain area, physical, mental or emotional health may deteriorate.

Chakras

The seven chakras are energy centers that receive and express *prana*, or life force energy. *Chakra* (pronounced with a hard “ch” as in cheese, not “sh” as in show) means wheel. The *chakra* system refers to seven wheels of spinning energy that correspond to the major branching of the nervous system within the spinal column, affecting organs within the physical body. Each *chakra* has an approximate physical location, a color associated with it, and qualities associated with it:

- *Muladhara* – root chakra, base of the spine/pelvic floor, the color red, element of earth, qualities of foundation, survival, and family/tribe
- *Swadhisthana* – sacral chakra, located at the lower abdomen/sexual organs, the color orange, element of water, qualities of emotion, desire, movement, change
- *Manipura* – solar plexus, located at the navel area, the color yellow, rules personal power, will, autonomy, and metabolism or assimilation of nourishment, both food and learning
- *Anahata* – heart chakra, the color green, related to love, compassion, and peace, the integrator of opposites in the psyche: mind/body, male/female, ego/soul
- *Vishuddha* – throat chakra, the color blue, related to communication, expression, and creativity
- *Ajna* – third eye, located between the eyebrows, the color indigo, related to intuition and psychic knowing, allowing us to “see” the big picture
- *Sahasrara* – crown chakra, top of the head, the color purple, connecting us to pure consciousness and awareness, bringing spiritual connection and bliss

The first six are considered the major chakras, while the seventh lies

beyond the physical realm. Each of the six major chakras is believed to influence or govern the bodily functions near its region of the spine. The chakras can be energized and vital, or sometimes blocked or dim. Through awareness, breathing, postures, and visualization they can become more balanced. Specific postures and sequences can be used to enhance certain chakras. Further information can be obtained through reading and workshops.

Nadis

Nadis are energy channels that carry *prana*. The three main channels are the *ida*, the *pingala*, and the *shushumna*. The central *nadi* is the *shushumna*, which corresponds to the spinal column, along which the *chakras* are located. The *ida* and *pingala* wind around the *shushumna* in a helix-like spiral, with the *ida* relating to the right brain, and left side of the body, terminating at the left nostril, and the *pingala* relating to the left brain, the right side of the body, and terminating at the right nostril. *Nadi Shodhana*, or alternate nostril breathing, is a *pranayama* practice intended to balance *prana*. There are said to be as many as 72,000 *nadis*, or subtle channels, in the human body. But these three are the only ones you need to know!

Prana Vayus

The five Pranas are the five vital currents of energy, sometimes referred to as the *Prana Vayus*, or just *Vayus*. *Vayu* means “wind”, and refers to the ways in which *prana* moves within our bodies. The practices of hatha yoga can optimize the functioning of the *vayus* and bring them under our conscious control. Awareness of the five *vayus* can be helpful in choosing yoga postures, breathing exercises and sequences that are energetically appropriate to balance your students’ energy.

1. *Prana Vayu* – while *prana* is the general name of the life force, the *prana vayu* is one of its specific functions. The *prana vayu* governs the region from the throat to the bottom of the heart, is associated with the element of air, and has an upward motion associated with the inhalation.

2. *Apana Vayu* – governs the lower body from the navel down through the legs, is associated with the element of earth, and has a downward moving force associated with exhalation and elimination, including waste as well as reproduction and childbirth

3. *Samana Vayu* – is the power of metabolism and digestive fire, located in the solar plexus and controlling the functioning of the abdominal organs. Samana vayu is concerned with discriminating nutrients from toxins, assimilating information to make sound choices, and be powerful in the world.

4. *Udana Vayu* – expels air upwardly through speech and sound, ruling the region of the throat and head, and associated with the element of ether, its function is expressive and articulative

5. *Vyana Vayu* – pervades the whole body, associated with the element of water, its function is cohesive, connecting the nerves, veins, muscles, and joints, and is felt on the periphery, especially the skin

Applying yogic wisdom to your classes

Remember, great teachers integrate wisdom and techniques from the various areas of yoga into their classes. Use the philosophy and its lessons as a supplement to your teaching of the physical postures. Do not force yourself to expound upon subtle anatomy or yoga philosophy if it does not feel natural or inspired. First and foremost, teach appropriate physical sequences with good alignment instruction, allowing themes and philosophy to emerge organically from your experience as a teacher and from your own practice.

Chapter 4: Creating a class

Sequencing

Unless you are teaching a style of yoga with a set sequence of postures such as Bikram or Ashtanga, you will need to choose the order of the postures you teach, otherwise known as “sequencing.” Put simply, sequencing matters. It matters in terms of how your students will feel in the postures – whether they will feel warmed up enough or ready for the postures you are teaching. And it matters in terms of how they will feel at the end of class and later on. Yoga postures work on the physical, emotional, and energetic bodies, and have a subtle but strong affect on our nervous systems. If we practice deep postures without first warming up, we may feel bad. If we practice active or intense postures but cool down appropriately afterwards, and practice the right counter-poses, we may feel good. It is your job as a teacher to structure your classes so that they achieve the desired results. Most beginning teachers plan and write out a sequence before teaching. Some experienced teachers also do this, but with experience comes the wisdom as well as the confidence to “wing it.” In the beginning, I do not suggest winging it. Be prepared, but also willing to change and adapt the class based on the experience level and energy of the students present that day.

There are five main ways to sequence your classes.

1. To create a balanced practice

A balanced practice will consist of a fairly equal number of standing postures, seated postures, forward bends, backward bends, twists, and inversions. Typically standing postures will precede seated postures and inversions, although this may vary depending on the tone you intend to set. For example, if you want the practice to feel very nurturing and calming, you may start out with supine postures to relax the nervous system, then gently introduce standing postures and inversions. If you want to create a fun and vibrant atmosphere, you might start with Sun Salutations, standing poses, and even inversions such as Handstand, before moving to the floor. The idea is for students to feel good and balanced when they get up to leave.

2. To address a pose or type of posture

If you want to address, say, hip openers or backbends, in particular, you would create a sequence that progressively warms up the required body parts, and teaches or emphasizes the types of actions students will need to approach the intended posture with ease. For example, a backbending class may start with standing postures that emphasize stability in the legs and pelvis, shoulder opening, and hip flexor/psoas release before moving into first gentle, and gradually more challenging backbends. Do not forget to practice appropriate counter-poses, such as a forward bend or abdominal strengthening exercise after backbending. Even if the sequencing intention is to address a pose or type of posture, you should always teach a balanced practice.

3. To build toward a “peak pose”

A peak pose is typically a “hard” pose that some students may be wary of, afraid of, unsure how to do, or maybe they have never even seen before. The structure of the class, then, will introduce poses that help the students master some of the smaller actions contained in the harder posture, building on them until the peak pose reveals itself toward the end of practice. As with #3, make sure to teach an appropriate counter-pose or cool-down if necessary.

4. To address a theme

Your theme may be postural or philosophical. An example of a postural theme might be “backbending to open the heart,” while a philosophical theme might be “balancing *santosa* (contentment) with *tapas* (discipline) in our practice.” You will introduce your theme, then connect it to the postures you teach in that class, so that it threads its way through the practice.

5. To be creative

In a flow or vinyasa yoga setting, the sequencing is often intended to be creative, offering new and different ways of grouping postures, linking them together creatively. This can be both fun and transformative for students, as well as amusing and challenging for teachers. While we often want to be creative in our sequencing, though, there are a few pitfalls to avoid. First, do not get so creative that you forget what you have taught on one side by the time you get to the other side. Also, do not link poses together “just because you can” if it does not make sense in the body,

and in terms of what poses you have already taught to prepare and warm up. Finally, do not link so many poses together on one side that the front or standing leg is exhausted. This is not healthy for the joints, or for the nervous system, which may feel out of balance or stressed. Remember, no matter what type of sequencing you are doing, you need to create a balanced practice.

Note that you may be teaching classes that combine or integrate one or more of the above sequencing styles. Have fun with it!

Communication skills

It is important to develop your own voice as a teacher and to be authentic. No one likes to hear a teacher put on their “yoga teacher voice.” The last thing you want is to sound like either a spaced out hippie or a phone sex operator (unless that is truly who you are, AND you happen to be a yoga teacher!) Speak in your own voice, only louder, because you need to be heard. If projecting your voice is difficult for you it may take some practice. Especially if you are teaching with music, you must be heard over the music. That being said, please do not shout. Find a balance. It may be helpful to record your classes for awhile and listen to yourself, and also to ask for (and gracefully receive) feedback from trusted sources. In terms of language and syntax, you also need to sound like yourself. Use your own speaking voice, conversationally, but professionally. Listen to the teachers you love and notice what you love about them. Is it that you feel like you know who they are, and that you like them? Probably yes. Their teaching skills and knowledge are only as good as their personality in terms of engaging and keeping students. Use what you learn from this exercise and apply it to yourself, but do not make the mistake of imitating the teachers you like. You need to be yourself. Accept that you will be nervous at first, and that it will take a while to really find your voice. If it helps to use the good old public speaking trick of imaging the whole audience, or in this case your class, in their underwear, go for it! Whatever works . . .

Adjustments and touch



Hands-on assists and adjusting students is part of teaching yoga, but touch is – ahem – a sensitive area. The only adjustments you should be using are ones you have learned and experienced directly from a qualified teacher, either in class, or in a workshop. As a beginning teacher, you should not just make them up. A great adjustment can transform a student's experience in a pose, while a bad one can, at best, annoy them; worse, offend them; or worst of all, injure them. The way I see it, there are three main reasons to give a hands-on adjustment. The first is to keep the student from potential injury, the second is to help them deepen the pose, or feel the posture more effectively, and third is to make them feel good. In my opinion, the first two of these can often be done verbally. The third – making them feel good – should be used sparingly so as not to create a situation where a student misreads the touch as some other type of attention.

Cultivating ambience

Ambience, or mood, may consist of lighting, temperature, music, or incense. Creating a mood is something that you may choose to pay a lot of attention to, or not. Some teachers prefer to have the room dimly lit with candles and soft music playing, while others choose bright lighting and silence. As a student you are aware that the atmosphere of the room sets the tone for the practice. The ambience you create should match the type of class you intend to teach. For example, if your class will be highly instructive, with a lot of alignment detail and verbal instruction, and possibly some work with partners, or the wall, it may not be appropriate

to have the room dimly lit or to have loud music playing. But if your class will be actively flowing, loud music may work, or if it will be deeply meditative, use candlelight. One skill that good teachers display is an ability to set the tone in the room, to match their teaching with the ambience they've created, and to alter the ambience as needed to adjust the energy of the class. What I mean is that sometimes you think you want flowing music, only to discover you have a bunch of beginners, or injured students, and determine that the music needs to come down, or off, so they can better hear what you are saying. Or maybe you planned a well-lit, instructive class full alignment detail, only to find your students unable to focus. Perhaps you change course by turning on soft music, turning down the lights, and introduce some gently breathing and flowing postures to bring their energy together. It may take practice, but mastery of the ambience of a room will be part of your job description.

Chapter 5: Getting your teaching business started

Relationships are everything

As in just about any industry, relationships are everything. Studio owners are more likely to hire someone they know and like than someone with a resume full of "certifications." The most common career path I have observed in the yoga world is that students practice in a certain yoga studio, or under a particular teacher, for long enough to build a relationship with that person, who eventually asks them to start teaching, or maybe to sub a class or two when someone is out, or recommends them to someone else who needs to hire a teacher. When I mentioned in the beginning of this book to begin cultivating these relationships, or deepening the ones you have already begun, it was with this end in mind.

These are most likely the people who will give you classes to teach. You will probably also seek out other venues, such as gyms and health clubs, who may be less choosy about the instructors they hire. I have heard that in gyms they might ask for a certification of some sort, as they would with a personal trainer or Pilates instructor. But that has not been my experience. They know as well as anyone (or they should) that there is no certification or licensure required to teach yoga. Another great route is corporate yoga classes. You might check around with companies in your area to see if they offer yoga classes as a benefit to their employees, or if they are interested in doing so. If you have friends who teach corporate classes, ask if they need more instructors, or if they need a sub. Subbing is an excellent way to get your foot in the door, get some experience, and some feedback to gain confidence and hone your skills.

The bad news...

How much you will get paid to teach yoga in the beginning is . . . not so much. Many studios start teachers at a rate as low as \$35 per class, although these days \$40-50 may be more typical. Some studios use a percentage, or per-student rate, or even a bonus of \$1-2 per student on top of the base rate, so busier classes may yield \$60-80 per class or more. Corporate classes typically pay more, anywhere from \$60-100 per session, as do private clients. As this is not a book on marketing for yoga teachers, I will not go much further into detail about how to find teaching jobs. I will say this – don't quit your day job just yet. Yoga teachers who make their living solely from teaching either have very lucrative corporate and private clients, or they run around town teaching at several different studios, 10-20 classes per week. I speak from experience when I say that teaching three or more classes per day is completely exhausting, not to mention you barely find the time for your own practice! When your personal practice suffers, your teaching suffers. As I have repeatedly stated, your teaching must come from a dedicated personal practice that inspires you.

The good news...

Doing something you love and serving others is extremely rewarding and fun. There are infinite manifestations of a yoga teacher's career—from studio teaching, to spas, to private lessons, to recording videos for YouTube, to leading retreats in exotic locations. If you can think of it or dream it, you can find a way to do it. As with any new career or career change, ease into it. Set your intention, follow your intuition, and see where the road leads you. It is my hope that you now feel you have the information and resources to begin the process of becoming a great yoga teacher – without paying a dime for teacher training. In these pages I have shared with you what makes a great yoga teacher, what certification means, what the YA is and is not, what you need to know to teach yoga, and what you need to do to get started. I often tell my students that they do not need to know how to do the pose before starting to practice it. As your yoga practice has likely shown you, and as you will teach your future students, the practice is meant to be daily and ongoing, and starts with the first step. Good luck!

Namasté,

Mara

Glossary of Terms

Ahimsa compassion or non-violence

Aparigraha non-covetousness or non-greediness

Asana posture, or seat

Ashtanga Yoga Patanjali's eight-limbed path, as described in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*

Asteya non-stealing

Bhakti Yoga the path of devotion to the divine, including prayer, ritual, and chanting

Bhandas internal energetic "locks"

Brahmacharya moderation or sexual restraint

[Chakras](#) centers, or wheels, of energy

Dharana concentration, one-pointedness of the mind

Dhyana meditation

Drishti Sanskrit for "gaze" or "point of focus"

Hatha Yoga literally "sun/moon", the generic name for any yoga that emphasizes physical postures and breathing

Ishvarapranidhana surrender to a higher power

Jnana Yoga the path of knowledge, through study, questioning, meditation, and contemplation

Karma Yoga the path of right action, or selfless service, focused on the causes and effects of our actions

Kleshas five afflictions that are the causes of human suffering

Koshas five sheaths, or layers of human consciousness

Moksha liberation from worldly suffering

Mudra symbolic gestures, usually of the hands and fingers

Nadis energy channels

Niyama observance or commitment

Prana life force, energy, or breath

Pranayama yogic breathing exercises
Pratyahara withdrawal of the senses
Raja Yoga the “royal” path, or the path of meditation or self-control
Sadhana daily spiritual or devotional practice
Samadhi blissful awareness
Santosha contentment
Saucha cleanliness or purity
Satya truthfulness
Siddhis seemingly magical spiritual gifts or powers
Svadyaya self-study and study of sacred texts
Tapas discipline or austerity
Ujjayi pranayama literally “victorious” (Sanskrit), It is practiced by toning the back of the throat and breathing as though through a small hole on the base of your throat, instead of through your nostrils, cultivating the sound of wind or water
Vayus five vital currents of energy, sometimes referred to as the *Prana Vayus*, *vayu* means “wind”, and refers to the ways in which prana moves within our bodies
Vinyasa literally means sequenced in an appropriate way, but it has come to mean postures linked together with breath or postures linked to one another
Yama code of conduct, or self-restraint
Yoga Alliance the national education and support organization for yoga teachers in the United States, who maintain a yoga teachers' registry to recognize teachers with training that meets their minimum standards
Yogi , *yogini* (fem.) people who practice yoga

Recommended Reading List

Journey Into Power by Baron Baptiste
Power Yoga by Beryl Bender Birch

Beyond Power Yoga by Beryl Bender Birch
Light on Yoga by B.K.S. Iyengar
Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health by B.K.S. Iyengar
30 Essential Yoga Poses by Judith Lasater
Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda
The Sivananda Companion to Yoga
Moving Into Stillness by Erich Schiffmann

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