

Hatha Yoga

What is Hatha Yoga?

Hatha Yoga is generally what we practice in the West and is described as the “*forceful Yoga of physical discipline*” but it is also interpreted as the union of the masculine and feminine via the sun (*ha*) and the moon (*tha*).

Compared to many spiritual philosophies that negate the body as an empty shell or a temptation to misery, in the Hatha Yoga tradition, the study of self includes the study of the body.

There are many practices within the Hatha Yoga tradition. Some of them are more esoteric and are not generally included in a standard, Western yoga practice (such as the practice of kriyas). Some of them, like asana, pranayama and meditation are commonly practiced in the West.

In a standard Hatha Yoga class, students are often guided through categories of poses to give their physical bodies (as well as emotions and mind) a thorough experience of movement and cleansing. In many classes, students are also guided through pranayama and meditation exercises that align with the theme of the class and support the asana practice.

Posture Categories and Suggested Sequencing

Centering (Sitting or lying down)

- A time to ‘tune in’ and observe physical sensations, emotions, thoughts and breath.

Warm-ups

- You can include *Pranayama* in this section
- Allows students to observe how they feel in ways they may not have noticed in stillness

Standing Poses

- Focus on grounding, stabilizing, support
- Can include Standing *Balancing* poses

Inversions

- They complement Standing Poses and deepen focus

Back Bends

- Typically the most energizing part of the class that releases body, mind and emotions.

Forward Bends

- They complement Back Bends; a calming transition to the latter part of the class.

Twists

- They complement both Back Bends and Forward Bends; bring spine back to centre.

Legs Up The Wall

- A cooling, restorative inversion; relieves body of its efforts during active part of class.
- Can also end the class with this in *Relaxation*.

Gentle Forward Bends

- To ground energy; eg., Little Boat, Child's Pose

Meditation or Calming Pranayama

- Helps prepare body and mind for Relaxation.

Relaxation

- Can be seated, lying down in Savasana or a Restorative Pose
- To help students integrate their experience of the practice.

What are warm-ups?

Warm-ups are a series of repetitious, gentle movements of the joints and muscles. These movements will bring a fresh supply of blood plus warmth and energy to muscles that are cold, tight and sore. Warm-ups also lubricate joints, which can help to reduce risk of injury as students start to both stretch and strengthen various muscles. It is a good idea to focus on muscle groups that will be most directly impacted by a posture/asana. Sometimes, moving in and out of a posture several times is a good warm-up for that very posture.

How to Teach Warm-ups

1. Have students take some time to centre on the breath and deepen it using abdominal breathing. This will bring more energy to all the muscle groups.
2. Use circular movements or movements in alternate directions from small to large as a way to lubricate the joints of the ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, shoulders and overall spine. Be mindful of circular neck rolls, especially with Beginner students. The cervical spine is vulnerable to injury and many Beginner students hold considerable tension in the muscles around the neck.
3. Flow from one warm-up to the next with only a brief pause in between to give your students a chance to observe warmth and sensations growing in the body.
4. Warm-up the core with abdominal strengthening movements, standing postures and balancing postures...combined with supportive breathing.

Benefits of Warm-ups

1. Raise body temperature, improve breathing, lubricate joints, bring elasticity and oxygen to muscles.
2. Begin to bring life force energy/Prana to weak and/or stagnant areas of the body.
3. Develop conscious awareness of the physical self (especially important with students who have become dissociated from their bodies) and of specific areas of the body.

4. Help to identify areas of physical strength and weakness and where the student may be chronically holding tension that they weren't even aware of.
5. Avoid the possibility of harming muscles and other connective tissues by straining 'cold' muscles.
6. Help students to experience exercise that is both enjoyable and safe!

Categories of Warm-ups

The warm-ups you choose should reflect the postures/asanas you'll be teaching in the class. Other considerations would be:

- **The time of day:** If it is the evening, you may want to start warming up with students in a supine position (on their backs).
- **The temperature of the room:** If it is a cool room, you may need to guide them through more vigorous warm-ups.
- The age of your students: A seniors class may spend a good portion of the class doing 'warm-ups' to reduce stiffness of joints and muscles.
- The asana as warm-up: An asana can sometimes be the warm-up for itself; for example, Mountain Pose/Tadasana

The following are suggestions for warm-ups; it is not an exhaustive list. Use your own creativity and allow this time to be playful, applicable and informative.

Supine Warm-ups (Lying on the back)

- Head rolls
- *Little Boat variations:*
 - Spinal rocking (side-to-side)
 - Sacral massage
 - Abdominal compression and release
- *Abdominal strengthening:*
 - Bicycle (keep pelvis anchored on ground)
 - Leg Lifts
 - Windmill Twists
- Reclined Twists

Seated Warm-ups

- *Joint Freeing Series:* moving joints in healthy range of motions
- Eye exercises
- Crab/Reverse Table with variations
- Arm lifts (forward, out to the side)
- Cross-legged Seated Twist
- Circling the Trunk while in cross-legged position
- 'Bum' walking: 'Scootching' buttocks up and down the mat
- Bound Angle/Butterfly
- Hip Adduction/Abduction (with bent knees, moving hips side-to-side)
- Squatting (be mindful - squatting can be harmful for people with knee and sciatic nerve issues)

'Tabletop' Warm-ups

- Cat/Cow (also called Cat/Dog) spinal flexion/extension
- Child Pose variations
- Puppy Stretch and/or Downward Dog
- Balancing Table
- Wagging the Tail (lateral hip movements)
- *Flowing* Thread-the-Needle (don't put weight into shoulder girdle or neck)
- Lateral knee lifts

Standing Warm-ups

- Hip movements (circles; lateral; pelvic rocking; figure-8; 'spell-your-name')
- Neck movements (flexion/extension; lateral flexion; mindful circles)
- 'Breath of Joy'
- Spinal Flexion & Extension (gentle Forward/Back Bends; Lateral Bends)
- Empty Shirtsleeves
- Intentional Tension/Release (shoulders to ears then release)
- Shoulder rotations; shoulder blade squeeze
- Eagle Arms; Cow-face Arms

Relaxation

Relaxation is an integral part of a Hatha Yoga practice. There can be a tendency to ignore this aspect or to not leave enough time for relaxation; however, it is this part that is so essential to our integrating the effects of the practice. Additionally, deep relaxation allows for deep healing as Prana/Life Force energy can flow more freely through the entire body, bringing it into a naturally harmonious and balanced state.

When we teach relaxation, it is important to create a certain kind of atmosphere in order to assist students in the 'letting go' process. The most important way of creating the right kind of atmosphere is being relaxed ourselves. If we are tense when leading students into a relaxation, then this will be communicated at a subtle level and will make it difficult for students to feel safe enough to surrender and release. It is a good idea as the teacher to pause and centre oneself through deep breathing before leading a relaxation exercise.

Some other considerations for creating a relaxing atmosphere:

- ***Voice quality:*** Your speech should be slower than the tempo of engaged conversation. A clear and rhythmical voice is more conducive to a relaxed state.
- ***Lighting:*** Remember to dim the lights (if you can) to assist students to move into a quieter place within themselves. If you cannot dim the lights, consider purchasing eye pillows that your students can use to block out bright lights.
- ***Soft music:*** Sometimes, soft music or music with 'nature sounds' can have a lulling effect on students. Take time to select music that is conducive to relaxation by listening to it first so that there are no lively sound-surprises mid-relaxation. If you enjoy Mantra chanting, you might consider softly chanting your students into relaxation, or playing a mantra chanting music selection.
- ***Posture:*** Savasana/Corpse Pose is considered the best posture for relaxation; however, there are other restorative supine and prone postures that may also have a deeply relaxing effect.

- **Timing:** Give your students time to get comfortable. This might also include inviting them to take a quick water or bathroom break or obtaining any additional props they may need. You can also offer to get those props for them if they are already settled in.
- **Length:** There are varying opinions on the ideal length of time to allow your students to experience relaxation. Beginners usually find it difficult to lie still for longer than 5 – 7 minutes; more advanced students tend to love a longer 10-15 min relaxation. Observe your students for any shifting or other movements that might indicate they are ready to begin coming out of relaxation.
- **Breathing:** Have your students focus on their natural breath and invite them to deepen their breathing. You may also invite them to try a ‘sighing’ breath or Ocean breath as these are ways that the body signals the nervous system to switch into relaxation mode.
- **Yourself:** It is important to remain as still and relaxed as you can when guiding your students through relaxation. Any excessive movements can be distracting to them and prevent them from being able to go deeply into relaxation. If you need to move, do so mindfully so as not to disturb the atmosphere you are creating.

Types of Relaxation Exercises

Contraction/Release

This is a very effective exercise, especially with Beginners, as it trains the student to become aware of specific areas of the body where they may be holding tension. It teaches them the difference between tension and relaxation and how to release tension from specific areas. The technique is simple enough; progressively guide your students to bring awareness to specific body parts, starting with the feet and gradually moving up to the head.

Start by having your students flex their toes and ankles to create increased tension in their feet. Instruct them to hold their breath as they do so, combining muscles tension with breath retention. After a few seconds, invite them to release both the tension and the breath. This teaches them that the exhaling breath can help them to release tension when they are off their yoga mats.

Guide them, step by step, to move through the entire body in this way, finishing with contracting their facial muscles. As you guide the students from feet to head, you might invite them to both mentally and physically envision relaxing by using language such as “Now consciously relax your feet and ankles; tell your feet and ankles to relax.” Afterwards, invite your students to scan their own bodies to see if there is any remaining tension and to breathe it out.

Although you can use this exercise for any level of student, you might find that more experienced students need fewer details and instruction. I.e., it may be enough to invite them to progressively contract and release muscles from feet to head, inhaling/holding breath on contraction, exhaling on the release...and then leave them to explore this in silence.

Guided Visualization

After your students have had a chance to settle into Savasana (or whatever 'relaxation' pose you have offered them), you might lead them through a guided visualization. Purposeful visualization is a powerful tool for transformation. There are many different kinds of visualizations you can use. Some examples are:

- Describe a place in nature and invite them to imagine themselves in that place
- Imagine the breath is a gentle wave, moving through the body
- Invite your students to imagine they are filling up with a warm, golden, healing light. You might even suggest they direct it to specific areas of their body that might need some extra 'TLC'.

Whatever method of Relaxation you choose, allow time for the experience to unfold. Perhaps you may wish to say a silent prayer or blessing for your students or repeat a Mantra at the end. Take time to lead your students out of relaxation; the transition should not be rushed. And remember to ground them with breathing before sending them off.