

Creating a sequence

In this paper I will discuss the topic of sequencing asanas in a yoga practice. This topic is viewed differently in varying yoga schools however there are some key concepts that can be found in all. I will discuss the importance of having an objective when creating a sequence, general ideas on ordering asanas in a yoga practice and the different groups of asanas which should be included in a practice. I will also discuss the importance of building up to more difficult asanas, creating a conscious flow into and out of each asana, choosing counter positions and pausing between sets of asanas to evaluate the body. In addition, I will briefly discuss mental and emotional effects of different asanas, which could be taken into consideration to help students. In closing, I will present some modifications of asanas that can be used when teaching students with special conditions such as pregnancy.

When deciding on a sequence of asanas for a yoga class it is important to first establish the objective for the practice. Do you have a short term objective that focuses on creating an immediate result? This could be to target a certain part of the body that needs attention, for example a sore muscle or muscle group, painful articulation in a joint or excess tension or stress in an area of the body. In such instances asanas can be chosen to target certain muscle groups or joints in order to relieve discomfort, keeping in mind to balance asanas with counter positions in order to create an overall sense of well-being. Other short term objectives could be to change the current emotional or mental state, creating a more relaxed, calm mood and preparing students for meditation. For achieving this short term goal a slower practice may be chosen with fewer asanas, held for a longer period of time, focusing the attention on the sensations of each asana and the changes occurring in the body. In this way, the attention is brought inward to a more subtle level.

If on the other hand your objective is long-term, the focus is placed on changes which occur after practicing a sequence for a period of time. A long-term result could be to obtain greater flexibility in a certain part of the body or to open the articulation of specific joints. By practicing a particular set of asanas repeatedly, we are able to improve flexibility or create more space in joints we wish to open more. For example, after a consistent practice of asanas which open the hips, we can gradually see more ease in sitting in padmasana, lotus pose. Another long-term result could be to successfully achieve more difficult asanas. Also in this instance, a consistent practice of asanas developing the muscles and flexibility required to perform a difficult asana, can gradually lead to the successful completion of the desired asana.

After considering the objective for the practice and the asanas suitable for this objective we can begin to sequence the asanas, creating a continuous flow. After an initial seated focus on the breath, a general guideline for sequencing is to start with standing asanas working your way to the ground to end in savasana. One idea for sequencing is standing asanas, kneeling asanas, sitting asanas, belly down asanas, and finally asanas lying on the back. Another idea for sequencing is standing asanas, backward bends, forward bends, twisting asanas, inversions and finally restorative asanas. In both examples a continual progression can be created without moving up and down, breaking the flow of the class.

Once a basic outline for the asanas has been chosen, it is important to make sure that at least one of each type of asanas is included. The types of asanas that we should try to always incorporate in class are- forward bends, backward bends, twists, balancing asanas and inverted asanas. In this way we realign the skeletal system and proper functioning of the organs. There are many different asanas of each of these types. It is not important to include each type of asana in every phase of the practice, just to include them at some point. For example it is not necessary to incorporate twists in standing, seated and lying down asanas, it is just important that they are incorporated at some point.

The sequence and flow of intensity is important to consider. The practice should slowly build in intensity to the most difficult asanas and then gently cool down to relaxation at the end. Difficult asanas should be placed in the middle of the practice. We should consider the asanas useful for preparing the body to successfully and easily arrive in the more difficult asanas and place these asanas prior to the more difficult asanas. If for example we want to incorporate svarga dvidasana, bird of paradise, as a difficult balancing asana, it is useful to incorporate shoulder and hip opening asanas before so that the asana is more accessible. Sometimes after a difficult or fatiguing asana a brief restorative pose is necessary, however the restorative asanas should only be held long enough to relieve excess heat or calm the breath. Holding restorative asanas for too long in the middle of a practice can undo the heat and energy created in the body and break the flow of intensity.

In addition to the flow of intensity, the flow from one asana to the next should be considered. It is often useful to create a sequence of asanas, flowing one into the next in order to gain the most benefit and ease in the position. Flowing from trikonasana, triangle pose, into parivrtta trikonasana, revolved triangle can feel very different than entering into parivrtta trikonasana from standing. This is not to say that one way is better than the other, but that the sensations of the two options should be considered when sequencing asanas. Thinking of the entrance into the asana, the sensations while maintaining the asana and the conclusion on the asana are all equally important to the overall benefit of the practice.

Counter positions are critical to sequencing. In order to realign the spine and rebalance the body, after forward bends backward bends should be incorporated to relieve tension in the legs and back, twists should be done for the same amount of time on both sides and after contracting a muscle or muscle groups, they should be gently stretched. Thus said, the objective of counter-positions is to relieve any tension created from an asana and does not need to be of the same intensity. T.K.V. Desikachar says “For any one asana there may be various counterposes possible, depending on where the tension is felt. Whenever we feel tension in any area of the body after an asana, we must try to alleviate it with a counterpose; that is, the simplest asana that relieves the tension. The counterpose for a powerful forward bend is a gentle back bend.” We should keep in mind that even though counter-positions are important we should not alternate back and forth between forward and back bends. We should try to flow into poses that are similar to one another remembering to incorporate counter-positions. Several forward folding asanas can be performed consecutively before a tension relieving back ward bend.

A useful tool to incorporate in sequencing is planned pauses to close our eyes and observe the sensations in the body, the emotional state and the mindset. Pauses can be restorative and deepen our awareness of our practice. This is a good time to have students focus on their breath, on the changes they notice in areas of tension or openness, on their emotional state and to bring a drifting mind back to the practice. These pauses should be short in order not to break the flow of energy and heat created in the heart of the practice.

Gauging the needs of students can also be considered when choosing asanas. If you see that your class is particularly low on energy, you could choose to start with low intensity asanas and slowly build up, or alternatively if students are high energy, it may be beneficial to create a more vigorous, stimulating practice. Similarly, sequencing of asanas can be chosen based on the dominant nadi. For example if the ida nadi is more open, more vigorous asanas such as backbends, standing asanas and inversions, may be chosen to create more heat and energy in the body. If the pingala nadi is dominant seated asanas and forward bends can be beneficial to cool and calm energy.

Brad Priddy writes the following interesting concept on the emotional effects of different categories of asanas. “The different categories of asanas exert different effects not only on your body, but also on your mind and emotions. The standing poses promote emotional stability and strength. The

forward bends are calming- even the very deepest forward bend should have a cooling effect, not a straining feeling. The back bends are antidepressive and elevate mood. The inverted poses increase energy and engender equanimity and a sense of well-being. Backbends are often given to students as a prescription for depression; and forward bends as a prescription for anxiety.” These concepts can be helpful for sequencing to help ourselves or students.

Just as sequencing of asanas can be chosen to help different problems such as depression or anxiety, sequencing can also be modified to fit the needs of students in particular conditions, such as pregnancy. In pregnancy it is important to strengthen the lower body and lower back as they will be bearing more weight as pregnancy progresses. It is also important to open the hips and hamstrings. Improving flexibility and being consistently conscious of the body’s changes are good ways to prepare for birthing. It can be useful to take more time in each asana concentrating on the breath and the possible movements of the fetus. The sequence can start standing as for a normal practice, followed by kneeling, seated and finally lying on the back. Asanas lying on the stomach should be avoided, as should inversions. Twists which focus on the upper body are safe to perform, but caution should be used in lower body twists. Balancing asanas can be done, but it is recommended to do them on a continuous basis as the equilibrium changes as the uterus grows. There are many other particular conditions, such as recovering from injury or certain illnesses that can also be addressed with modifications in the sequencing, just as with pregnancy.

Deviations can be made from these general guidelines of sequencing; however they should always be made for a specific reason. If during a yoga class you feel drawn to incorporate a new posture which was not foreseen, do so only if it fits into the above guidelines and if the correct warm-up asanas have been done. An alternative to the above sequence can be performed in the morning, where the reverse sequence can be done- starting with lying down asanas and working your way to standing, and completing the practice with standing relaxation.

Resources

"5 Common Sequencing Errors." *5 Common Sequencing Errors*. Heagberg, Kathryn., n.d. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.

Cook, Jennifer. "Find Your Match Among the Many Types of Yoga | Yoga for Beginners." *Yoga Journal*. N.p., 28 Aug. 2007. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.

Gatto, Massimo. "Creare Una Sequenza.": n. pag. 27 Dec. 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.

Joice, Stacy. "13 Yoga Modifications For Pregnant Women." *MindBodyGreen*. N.p., 23 May 2013. Web. 08 Jan. 2015.

Lindsay, Jamie. "Principles of Sequencing: How to Plan Yoga Class to Energize or Relax." *Yoga Journal*. N.p., 28 Aug. 2007. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.

Moyer, Donald. "The Principles of Sequencing." *Yoga Journal*, n.d. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.

Priddy, Brad. "Sequencing of Asanas." *Sequencing of Asanas*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.

"Sample Sequences." *Yoga Teacher Central* :: N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.

"Yoga Sequencing Principles." *Yoga Teacher Central* ∴ N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Jan. 2015.