



starting yoga for the first time

New to yoga? Wondering just what it involves? In this brief article we answer the most common questions you might have. We hope our answers will give you the confidence to set off on your new pathway to health and balance in a yoga class.

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Does this sound like you: You feel flat, rundown, stressed to the eyeballs. You can't remember the last time you touched your toes. Your neighbour, the one with five kids who always looks serene (and she's not on medication!) suggests you come along to her yoga class. "Why not?" you sigh. "When did I last do anything for my body?" But as you rummage around in your dressing table drawer for a not-too-clingy pair of tights and a *very* loose-fitting t-shirt, you begin to have doubts. "What exactly *is* yoga anyway?" you ask yourself. "How hard will it be? Will I have to sit around chanting? Or stand on my head? Will everyone else be 19 and super-fit? Hey, just what am I letting myself in for?"

Relax. A recent survey conducted by RMIT found that most Australian yoga students are simply ordinary people who decide they need to improve their health and their lifestyle. The main reasons Australians start yoga are to reduce stress, increase flexibility and strength, and reduce backpain and headaches. The RMIT survey results also suggest that most people find yoga has very positive outcomes.

The benefits of yoga

Thousands of Australians of all ages, with varying abilities, aims and needs, practice yoga. Our sedentary lifestyle – with long hours at computers or commuting in our cars – can cause backache, neck problems and heaviness in the limbs. The hectic, competitive nature of daily life can also deplete us physically and emotionally, resulting in stress-related problems such as insomnia, digestive problems, and respiratory and nervous disorders.

As the many Australians already attending yoga classes can testify, yoga has the ability to strengthen the body and calm the mind. Mental clarity increases, which aids concentration and steadies the emotions. As we practice yoga, we improve our posture and

muscular structure, invigorate the circulatory system and the internal organs, aid digestion and stimulate the endocrine system. This in turn helps to strengthen the immune system.

But the benefits of yoga go well beyond improvements in common medical complaints because yoga is not just a health or fitness work-out. Yoga is also not a religion. It's not a sport, and it's not just a way to have a bit of a stretch. So what it is? In fact yoga is a systematic discipline to restore balance to the mind, body and spirit. If this sounds a bit New Age, it isn't – yoga has been around for thousands of years. It's worked for millions of people before you. So, wouldn't you like to a bit of balance in your life? If the answer is, yes read on!

Getting the physical into balance first

Classical or traditional yoga is a comprehensive and practical philosophy of life. Yoga suggests principles to guide our behaviour towards other people and our care of ourselves. Yoga suggests physical and mental practices to bring us equanimity and stability. In the west, the most widely practiced of all these dimensions of yoga is the physical aspect, what is called Hatha yoga.

'Hatha' simply means the physical dimension of yoga, and it is what we're familiar with as the yoga poses or postures. Hatha yoga is a great place to start your yoga journey, although eventually you may wish to go further and explore yogic breathing practices, yogic meditation, and perhaps even yogic principles of behaviour. All these dimensions work together to help us live a healthy, peaceful, balanced life.

But your first introduction to yoga in Australia is likely to be in a hatha yoga class, as you learn to become deeply aware of your body by moving into different yoga poses, known in Sanskrit (the original language of yoga) as *asanas*.

Although most yoga classes teach Hatha yoga, there are quite a few different styles or schools of yoga for you to choose from. Each style is simply a variant of the common classical principles of Hatha yoga.

Styles of yoga

You may have read in magazines and newspapers about movie stars practicing Ashtanga or Iyengar yoga and wondered what these labels mean. These are simply derivatives of Hatha yoga, or different styles. Often the name of each style derives from the teacher who originated that particular orientation to Hatha yoga. For example, Iyengar Yoga is named after the Indian yoga master, BKS Iyengar, who introduced his form of Hatha yoga to the west in the 1970s.

Another well-known style is called Ashtanga yoga. This is a dynamic form of hatha yoga, where you move from one posture to another in set sequences. Because it is quite vigorous and demanding, this is a style that often appeals to younger, fitter students. Other yoga styles practiced in Australia include Sivananda, Satyananda, Bikram, Dru, and Yoga in Daily Life, just to name a few. You can read about most styles of yoga in books, or search the internet. One of the beauties of yoga is that there is a style to suit each person. To find a style that suits you, attend classes in a few different styles.

How to find a class

You can source a yoga school or teacher through the Yellow Pages, by Googling the internet, or by visiting the 'Find a Teacher' page on our website: www.ayl.com.au. Don't be afraid to try a few different schools and classes. Talk to the teachers at the classes you go to, and get a feel for the teacher's approach. All teachers have yoga at heart but they all have different emphases and methods of teaching. It's important to find a

teacher and a class where you feel comfortable and can enjoy your yoga. Don't give up on yoga because you don't like a particular class or feel you don't fit in. Try another class in the same style, or try a class in a different style. Different styles suit different temperaments, bodies and stages of life, so look around to find what feels right for you at this time in your life.

How to enjoy your first yoga class

If you haven't done yoga before, try to start with a Beginners class. Most schools and teachers offer Beginners courses, often run over a 6 to 12 week period, once a week. Once you've finished a Beginners course, some schools will suggest you join their 'General' or 'Level 2' classes, while others may have on-going classes for 'Level 1' or 'Beginner' students for the first 6 or 12 months.

Some yoga classes will use Sanskrit terminology to describe the postures, while others will use English equivalents as well the Sanskrit terms. For example, one famous pose is called the Triangle pose, or (in Sanskrit) Trikonasana. Initially the Sanskrit names may be a little confusing but because you'll hear the terms repeated many times over the weeks and months, you'll quickly become familiar with the terminology.

To make sure you enjoy your yoga class, wear loose fitting, comfortable clothing. For example, shorts or flexible tights and a t-shirt. The yoga class is not a fashion arena, so don't feel you have to buy the latest brand fitness gear before you turn up! You simply want clothes in which you can move comfortably without getting either too hot or too cold. Yoga is done barefoot, so expect to leave your shoes and socks at the door.

Most yoga schools provide yoga mats and other equipment, but sometimes small classes in rented premises require that you bring your



ABOVE: One famous pose is called the Triangle pose, or (in Sanskrit) Trikonasana.

own mat. If in doubt, ring first to find out. You may want to take a blanket or jumper for the relaxation component, and a drink bottle in case you get thirsty.

Avoid eating a meal for the two hours before class. A light snack is fine if taken one hour beforehand.

Arrive early to your first class, turn off your mobile phone, and then introduce yourself to your teacher. Let the teacher know of any injuries or health conditions that may affect your ability to participate. This may include a sprain or back problem, a past injury, the residue of a stressful day, or in the case of women, the onset of menstruation.

Many teachers start with a simple relaxation exercise, or simply invite students to focus attention on the breath. Usually there are some warm-up stretches, followed by a series of postures. You may find some postures easier than others depending on your strength, flexibility, ability to balance and cardio-vascular capacity. Yoga is a non-competitive discipline. It doesn't matter if your ability on the mat is different to that of the student on the mat nearby. You should not compare yourself to others, and you'll find to your delight that no one else compares you either.

Never use force to deepen into a posture. More muscle power and deeper stretches are not necessarily better. What yoga does seek from the enthusiastic student is greater awareness, sensitivity and stillness. With these come the real breakthroughs. At the end of the class

most teachers incorporate a relaxation period, known by its Sanskrit name Shavasana (literally: the Corpse pose!). This period of lying down in complete quiet allows your body to absorb the benefits of the practice. Most classes run for 60 or 90 minutes.

Once you've started

To maximise the benefits of yoga, try to attend a class once a week, more if you have the time and the inclination. This will help you learn technique and more easily develop an appreciation and understanding of yoga. Many students attend two or three times a week, and schools often offer reduced fees for regular attendance at multiple classes.

You'll increase your motivation and progress if you also practice a bit of yoga on your own, at home. Try to set aside 15 minutes every couple of days to practice what you are learning in your class. It won't be long before you'll be looking forward to this time for yourself.

One of the many joys of yoga is that you can practice it almost anywhere, with minimal equipment and for whatever time is available. You may find yourself developing a lifelong addiction to your portable 'home practice'. You'll enjoy knowing that you can maintain your mental and physical health whether you're travelling around the world on business or leading a busy family life.

We wish you a happy, fruitful and peaceful introduction to yoga. Enjoy your practice!