

## **WHEN & HOW TO PRACTICE YIN YOGA**

There are no absolutes. The question of when to practice Yin Yoga has no absolute answer. There are many possible answers, and each one is simply different from the others, not better or more correct. We find we have many options for when to practice Yin Yoga, depending upon what we would like to achieve through our practice.

We could do our yin practice:

- When our muscles are cool (so they don't steal the stretch away from the deeper tissues)
- Last thing at night (to calm the mind before sleep)
- Before an active yang practice (again, before the muscles become too warmed up)
- In the spring or summer (to balance a natural yang time of year)
- When life has become very hectic (to balance the yang energies in our lives)
- After a long trip (traveling is very yang, even if we are sitting down a lot during the trip)
- During your moon cycle for women (to conserve energies)

Yin Yoga deliberately targets the deeper connective tissues. To be most effective we want the muscles to be relaxed. If the muscles are warm and active they will tend to absorb most of the tension of the stretch. When we do our Yin Yoga practice early in the morning, the muscles have not yet woken up; this is why we feel so stiff when we first wake up. In the same way, doing our yin practice before an active yang practice allows the stretching to settle deeper into our tissues.

By the end of the day our muscles have been warmed up and are at their longest. The physical benefits of a yin practice will be fewer at this time; however, the psychological benefits may be greater. The daytime is yang. A yin practice, before going to sleep, may balance this energy. Similarly the spring and summer are yang times of year. When life is busy, when we spend many hours traveling, these are all yang times of our life. Balance is achieved when we cultivate yin energies. During a woman's menstrual period she may naturally find a yin practice beneficial.

On the other side of the coin, a yin practice is not recommended when we have already been very placid. After sitting at a desk for eight hours in the dead of a dull winter's day, a more active practice may create balance much better than a yin practice. Listening to your inner guide may give you the best answer to the question: is this a time for yin or yang?

If you are pregnant or have serious health concerns such as joint injury, recent surgery, epilepsy, diabetes, or any cardiovascular diseases (especially high blood pressure), be sure to discuss your intention to practice yoga with your health care professional.

Don't wear perfume or cologne when you practice. Deep breathing is part of the practice and you do not want to be deeply inhaling these fumes.

For Yin Yoga:

- Do not eat anything for at least one to two hours before class. And no big meals at least three hours before class. Give yourself time to digest before your practice. (For a yang practice you would extend the waiting times before practicing.)
- Before you begin it is nice to have a shower. Be fresh.
- Evacuate bowels and bladder.
- If you are already physically exhausted, keep the practice very brief and gentle.
- Avoid practice if you have had a lot of sun that day. Prolonged sunbathing depletes the body – let it recover before stressing it further.
- Remove wristwatches and anything metallic that makes a complete circle around the body. [1] If practical, remove glasses too.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing, so that the body is not restricted.
- In Yin Yoga, you will not generate heat internally. Feel free to wear extra layers of clothes and socks: keep the room a little warmer than normal.
- Have cushions, blocks and blankets handy for padding, and to sit up on for most forward bends and meditation.
- Remove obvious distractions: unplug the phone, put out the cat, tell family members that you need some quiet time now.
- Avoid drafts and cold flowing air.

Above all, practice in a relaxed manner. If you have something to do right after your practice, decide up front to finish earlier than necessary, so you don't feel rushed at the end. Don't expect to have a "great practice" that kind of expectation can be counter-productive. Expect to do the best you can do and just be present to what arises.

Now on to how to practice Yin Yoga.

The first principle of Yin Yoga is – every time you come into a pose, go only to the point where you feel a significant resistance in the body. This advice applies to all styles of yoga – yin or yang. Don't try to go as deep as you possibly can right away. Give your body a chance to open up and invite you to go deeper. After thirty seconds or a minute or so, usually the body releases and greater depth is possible. But not always. Listen to the body and respect its requests.

Consider your will and your body as two dancers. When you watch two dancers in a wonderful performance, they move in total unison. You cannot tell who is leading and who is following. The dance flows with an ease and grace that seems impossible given the effort that must be there somewhere; and yet it is effortless. Too many beginning (and, unfortunately, even experienced) yoga students make their yoga into a wrestling match – the mind contending with the body, trying to force it into postures that the body is resisting. Yoga is a dance, not a wrestling match.

The essence of yin is yielding. Yang is about changing the world; yin accepts the world for the way it is. Neither is better than the other. There are indeed times when it is appropriate and even necessary to change the world. As we have already observed, yang is a quality much admired and modeled in our culture. We are taught at an early age to make something of ourselves, to change the world and leave our mark on it. And that is perfectly normal some of the time. However, we are rarely taught how to balance this quality with the quality of acceptance. We are not given the chance to learn how to not struggle and just allow things to unfold. Part of the yin practice is learning this yielding.

This philosophy is reflected well in the following prayer, which has uncertain roots. It has been circulating the world for perhaps one hundred years. It speaks to this very challenge of balancing yin and yang. The prayer is:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change  
Grant me the courage to change the things I can change  
And grant me the wisdom to know the difference.

Accepting the things we cannot change is the serenity of yin. The courage to change what needs to be changed is yang. Harmony or balance in life comes from having the wisdom to know the difference. This wisdom cannot be given to you or taught to you. It must be earned and learned through your own experience. We have the opportunity to gain this wisdom. Listen to your body, go to your first edge and when, and if, the body opens and invites you in deeper, then accept the invitation and go to the next edge. Once at this new edge, again pause and wait for the next opening.

In this manner we play our edges, each time awaiting a new invitation. We ride the edges with a gentle flowing breath, like a surfer riding the waves of the ocean. The surfer doesn't fight against the ocean, she goes with it. Fighting the ocean is a silly thing to do.

When you come into the pose, drop your expectations of how you should look or be in the pose. There is a destructive myth buried deep inside the Western yoga practice. This myth is that we should achieve a model shape in each pose. That is – we should look like some model on the cover of a yoga magazine. To this end we use

our body to force ourselves into a required shape. To dislodge this myth we should adopt the following mantra:

“We don’t use our body to get into a pose; we use the pose to get into our body.”

Once we have reached an edge, pause; go inside and notice how this feels. You know the pose is doing its work if you can feel the body being stretched, squeezed, or twisted. Those are the three things we can do to ourselves in a pose: we are compressing tissues, stretching tissues, or twisting (shearing) tissues.

Another mantra to adopt in our practice is:

“If you are feeling it, you are doing it.”

You do not need to go any further if you are already feeling a significant stretch, compression, or twist in the body. Going further is a sign of ego; it is not doing yoga. Staying where you are is embracing yin.

This is not an excuse to stay back and not go deep into the posture. When we play our edges we come to the point of significant resistance. This will entail some discomfort. Yin Yoga is not meant to be comfortable; Yin Yoga will take you well outside your comfort zone. Much of the benefit of the practice will come from staying in this zone of discomfort, despite the mind’s urgent pleas to leave, to move, to do anything but stay. This too is part of the practice.

As long as we are not experiencing pain, we remain. Pain is always a one-way ticket out of the pose. Pain is a signal that we are tearing the body, or close to tearing the body. Burning sensations, deep twisting or sharp electrical-like pains are definite no-nos – come out immediately. Dull, achy sorts of sensations are to be expected, however. But, no teacher can know what you are feeling; be your own guru at these times and develop your wisdom. Come out when you are struggling to stay at this edge. If you feel your muscles tensing, you are struggling!

Be aware that our edges are not only physical ones; we have emotional and mental edges too. You may find that you are unconsciously holding back from going deeper because if you went one millimeter further you would be flooded with painful memories, thoughts, or feelings. You may not be ready for these yet. Honor your edges wherever they appear. Honor them, but above all notice them!

Playing the edges is not always a “go further go further go further” process. Often we go forward pause go pause maybe back up a little wait then go again or maybe just stop there. Our edges are always changing: yesterday they may have been quite different than today. Our bodies change. Some days we retain more water in our

tissues than other days. Water retention affects our flexibility. We cannot expect that every day our edges will be in the same place. Accept these changes and just take what is offered.

“Acceptance: that is the essence of yin.”

Next in the Yin Yoga practice is stillness. Once we have found the edge, we settle into the pose. We wait without moving. This is our resolution, our commitment. No matter what urges arise in the mind, no matter what sensations arise in the body, we remain still.

There are two exceptions to this advice. First, we move if we experience pain or if we are struggling to stay in the pose. And the second exception is – we move if the body has opened and is inviting us to go deeper. Unless these two reasons arise, we remain still. This is not a time to fix our pedicure, to look around and check out what the other students are wearing. This is the time for stillness.

Sarah Powers teaches that we seek three kinds of stillness:

1. Stillness of the body like a majestic mountain
2. Stillness of the breath like a calm mountain lake
3. Stillness of the mind like the deep blue of the sky

The body becomes as still as a great mountain. A mountain is unaffected by the winds and dramas swirling around it. Clouds come and go, rains pelt and snows melt, but the mountain remains.

Stillness in the body means the muscles are inactive. Every time we move, we engage our muscles. The muscles naturally want to take any stretch in the body. One of the muscles' jobs is to protect the joints. Only if we keep the muscles very quiet can we allow the effect of a deep stretch to sink into the joints. Fidgeting uses the muscles; fidgeting is a sign of a distracted mind.

When we move, we require energy. Energy is obtained by breathing. When we move, we affect the breath. Stillness of the body leads to stillness of the breath.

Stillness of the breath:

Stillness here does not mean cessation. The breath becomes quiet, unlabored and gentle. Like the surface of a mountain lake, unruffled by wayward breezes, the breath is calm. A calm breath is regular and even, slow and deep, and natural, unforced.

Some students prefer a soft ujjayi breath during their yin practice. This is perfectly okay, as long as it is soft. The harsher ujjayi found in the yang practices may create waves on the surface of the lake. A soft rhythmic sound of the breath will assist with calming the mind.

The breath need not be shallow or short, but it must be regular and unforced. You may try to extend the breath to four seconds, or longer, on each inhalation and exhalation. There may arise natural pauses between the inhalations and exhalations. This is fine, as long as it is unforced and natural. In the pauses between the breaths is the deepest stillness. Allowing the breath to be long, even, and deep is part of allowing this stillness of the breath to arise.

Once the breath has become quiet, the deepest stillness arises.

Stillness of the mind:

The sky is always with us. Clouds may block our view, but we know with a certainty beyond faith that, behind the clouds, the deep blue sky is there. The sky is a metaphor for our true nature. We rarely see who or what we are, because there is so much drama in our lives, so many thoughts and distractions prevent us from seeing clearly what is really there. But on brief, wonderful occasions, the clouds momentarily part, and we get a glimpse of the blue sky behind the drama. As our practice deepens, these holes in the clouds come more frequently, and the gaps become larger. Eventually we see more and more of the sky for longer and longer periods.

This vision of our true nature is possible only when the clouds of thoughts have drifted away; stillness of the mind is required for this clarity. Stillness cannot be forced; the very act of trying to become still defeats itself. Stillness here must arise spontaneously of its own accord. We can, however, create the conditions for this arising.

To still the mind, the breath must be calm. To calm the breath, the body must be still. When these conditions have been met, deep awareness is possible. This state can be achieved only by commitment and dedication. Commit to stillness and allow whatever arises to be just what it is.

When we have arrived at our edge, once we have become still, all that is left to do is to stay. The yin tissues we are exercising are not elastic tissues. They do not respond well to constant movement: they are plastic. Plastic tissues require long-held, reasonable amounts of traction to be stimulated properly.

Reasonable is a relative word. If you have ever worn braces you know that the pressure is not comfortable, but neither is it the maximum you could bear. Your

orthodontist knows that applying twice as much tension in the braces does not mean you can get away with wearing them for only half as long. Yin tissues don't respond to maximum stresses for a short time.

Paul Grilley noticed that basketball players, who jump up and down, placing tremendous loads upon the ligaments of their feet, do not develop fallen arches. Their arches don't fall because the extreme strain is very brief. They are more likely to break bones, or tear ligaments or tendons in their feet, than to develop fallen arches. However, a one-hundred-pound waitress, who is standing on her feet for eight hours a day, is a prime candidate for fallen arches. She is experiencing a gentle pressure for a long period of time. That is the condition for changing our yin tissues.

Yang postures may be held for as little as five breaths, or as long as a couple of minutes, depending upon the style of yoga being practiced. All yang poses require muscular engagement to maintain the pose. Yang tissues require yang exercise. Yin postures are generally held for at least one minute, and for some people as long as twenty minutes. Yin tissues require yin exercise. It is the long, gentle pressure that coaxes yin tissues into being strengthened.

It can be dangerous to mix up these forms of exercise. Yang tissues can be damaged by being stressed in a yin manner – statically held in one position for a long period of time. No physical trainer would suggest you try to build stronger biceps by holding a heavy barbell in a half-curved position for five minutes. Muscles need repetitive movement to grow stronger. Similarly, being stressed in a yang manner can damage yin tissues. Repetitively dropping back from standing into the wheel pose can overwork the ligaments in the lower back, eventually wearing them out. We must make sure we exercise yang tissues in a yang way and yin tissues in a yin way. The yin way is to hold a pose under a reasonable, non-maximum stress for long periods of time.

If you are practicing on your own, use a timer or a stopwatch to set a constant length of time for the postures – three to five minutes may work well for you. If you are just beginning Yin Yoga, you may want to start with one- or two-minute holds and work your way toward longer periods. You may find that some postures allow you to remain in the pose longer than others – this is all right. Our bodies are not uniformly open. It may be better to stay in a challenging pose, like saddle, for less time than in an easier pose, like butterfly. If you are struggling to remain in a pose, come out – regardless of whether the timer has sounded or not.

Jolie's Quote: "When in doubt, back out" or come out.

The yin practice is very portable – you can take it with you anywhere – you don't need a yoga studio, you don't even need a yoga mat. All you need is four cubits of space on

the floor. That is to say – all you need is enough room to stretch out. You can do these poses while doing other activities. While this may not provide you with the deepest benefits – the meditation practice you get with a dedicated practice – you can still affect your tissues physically. Sitting in yin poses while reading or talking on the phone, while eating at your coffee table or watching television, will help open the tightest hips.

One last bit of advice: people love to do things that they love to do. Sounds obvious. Said another way, when you are in balance you will tend to keep doing things that keep you in balance. However, when you are out of balance, you will tend to continue to do things that keep you out of balance! Active people love to do active yoga. Calmer people (a nice way of saying less active people) love to do calming yoga. Don't always practice what you love; practice what you need! Active people probably need Yin Yoga more than anyone else. Calm people probably need to do more yang practices more than anyone else.

Now that you have some idea of how to practice Yin Yoga, the next step is to learn the postures, also known as the asanas.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika lists only sixteen postures. Of these, half are seated positions. Those postures are meant to be held for a long period of time. They are yin postures.

Contraindications should always be checked out before trying a posture for the first time. Remember, not all poses are for every body; know and respect your limits. If a certain pose is not right for you, don't worry about it; there are lots of other ways to work the same tissues. Choose another posture that is more appropriate for you. You will find some suggestions offered in the alternatives and options.

The recommended time to hold a pose is very subjective. There are guidelines offered, which you should completely ignore if they are not appropriate for you. Some students can remain in the asanas much longer than indicated; others must come out much earlier. Listen to your inner teacher and respect your body's unique needs.

When coming out of a pose there will be a natural sense of fragility – we have been deliberately pulling the body apart and holding it apart. The sense of relief is to be expected, and even enjoyed. Yes, despite some myths to the contrary, you are allowed to enjoy your practice! Smile when you come out of the pose! Laugh – cry even. Enjoy this moment.

One of the benefits of Yin Yoga is this experience of coming out of the asana. We learn what it will be like when we are ninety years old! We gain a new respect for our



grandmother, and what she is going through, and we resolve to put off that inevitable day of decrepitude as long as possible. After a deep, long-held hip opener, it may feel like we will never be able to walk again – but be assured the fragility will pass. Sometimes, however, a movement in the opposite direction will help. This is a counterpose, a balancing posture that brings us back to neutral.

Many of the yin yoga asanas will be familiar to experienced yoga students. However, these students will notice that the name is different in the yin tradition – this is deliberate. The pose may look the same, but the intention is different. The yin pose of Swan looks identical to the yang pose of Pigeon, but in Pigeon, as in most yang poses, the muscles are the targets. In a yang pose, we engage the muscles and stretch them. In the yin practice, we relax the muscles; we aim our intention into the joints and the deep tissues wrapping them, not the more superficial tissues of the muscles or skin.

There is no consensus in the world of yoga on naming asanas. Even in the yang tradition you will come across different names for the same postures and different postures sharing the same names. This is also true in the yin tradition; different names abound. The ones shown here are the names more commonly used but they are not universal. Where two names are common, both names are given, but we have not attempted to be exhaustive.

Between yin poses many teachers suggest a bit of yang movement. This feels nice and stimulates the flow of energy in the body before the next posture. Remember, you can do too much of anything. Too much yang leads to exhaustion and depletion – too much yin, however, leads to stagnation. Some yang between the postures helps keep stagnation from developing. Choose whatever yang movements would feel nice: let your body decide or pick something from the list below.

The following list is not exhaustive and it is not the intention during this journey to understand yang asanas. You may have to find a teacher to offer you more yang options or more details on the postures suggested.

Boat – while sitting, extend legs out in front of you and up in the air, holding the back of the legs, or for more challenge, extend the arms forward.

Cat's breath – flowing from Upward Facing Cat to Downward Facing Cat.

Crocodile – like a push-up but on elbows/forearms and held for a minute or less.

Down dog and all its variations

Eye-of-the-needle – lie on your back with knees bent. Place the right ankle on the left knee. Reach the right hand through the triangular “window” formed by right leg and clasp the left hand on the top of the left knee (or underneath the knee if on top is not achievable). Pull the knee and ankle toward your left shoulder until you feel the stretch in the right hip. Remember to do both sides.

Fish – but make it a gentle fish, sometimes done with legs in butterfly. Place your straight arms under your back as you lie down; hands can be right under the buttocks and elbows as close together as possible. Bend the elbows as you lift your chest. Relax the top of your head to the floor and rest on it gently.

Hinge – while lying on your back, raise and lower the legs; knees bent is easiest, straight legs is harder. To support the back, place your hands, with palms down, under your buttocks.

Lie on your back and hug the knees to the chest and rock from side to side.

Locusts (aka Infant) – lie on your stomach and lift your arms, chest and legs up.

Plank – full push-ups or hover above the floor in Chaturanga. For Chaturanga do the full push-up but lower a few inches toward the floor. Make sure you don't sink into the shoulders or let your hips sag. Your shoulders should not be lower than your elbows. You should be able to see your toes!

Sun Salutations (recommended only at the end of a practice and done for at least ten minutes).

Tabletop (also known as Hammock) or Slide – with hands behind you on the floor, lift your hips up. Feet can be on the floor with legs bent or legs straight (having the legs straight turns this into the Slide). Flow into this one by raising hips and lowering hips with the breath (up on inhale/down on exhale). After three or four cycles, hold the position for three or four breaths.

Windshield wipers – sit with hands behind you on the floor and feet apart, drop knees from side to side. Can be done lying down too..

Yang movements between yin postures should be brief. If each style is performed for a long period (say over five minutes), the body can be confused by the constant shifting from yin mode to yang mode. If you want to include a lot of yang postures during a yin practice, group the yang asanas into a large segment of time. Allow at least fifteen minutes of constant yang practice or at least fifteen minutes of yin practice to unfold at the same time. Do not keep switching back and forth more quickly than that. Keep the yang counterposes brief between the yin postures.

Traditionally, Yin Yoga works the area from the navel to the knees, but the principles of Yin Yoga can be applied to all areas of the body. We know that the yin tissues that we are targeting are the denser, deeper, more plastic/less elastic tissues, such as the ligaments, joint capsules, cartilage, bones and fascial networks of the body, but these tissues are found in the upper body as well as the lower body. We can apply the principles of Yin Yoga all over the body. Normally we focus on the lower body because as we age it is this area that tightens up the most. But we can, indeed, do Yin Yoga for the wrists, arms, shoulders, and neck.