

Gentle Yoga - The Essence of a Mindful Yoga Practice

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Gentle Yoga

The definition of gentle yoga is rather open to interpretation—that of the person who is about to practice yoga or be guided in a yoga practice. What may be 'gentle' yoga to one person may be challenging—if not impossible—to another. Simply asking someone to get dressed for a quiet, introspective yoga session may be too much if they are in cancer treatment; a person with multiple sclerosis or lupus may find that 'gentle' yoga involving multiple props, getting to a class and returning home, and then showering are enough to bring on several days of utter exhaustion. In contrast, our expectations and presumptions may hinder an individual: many amputees can benefit from a regular and energetic yoga practice, with specific modifications, if fully healed; someone with Parkinson's can get up and down off the floor much more readily than they are given credit for if they are shown how, rather than merely offering them a chair to sink into.

Lying on a floor with multiple supports and props, surrounded with music and scents, may be pleasantly relaxing to some, yet is it gentle yoga? Where does the mind go—the consciousness, the awareness? Whether the mind is dull and heavy, or agitated and distracted, movement may be a good thing... either to release nervous energy and focus the mind, or waken the body and thus stir the mind. A yoga practice can be gentle and highly restorative simply by listening to the state of the mind and then applying this observation to the practice. Any mindful yoga practice will be gentle which maintains a natural breath, respects the abilities and limitations of the body, and focuses the mind and senses on the practice rather than external objects (props, blocks, chairs) and sensory distractions (music, scents, superheated rooms).

"Watch the breath mindfully. Choose the sequence wisely. Still the mind attentively. Else, do not do yoga." Whether teacher, therapist, yoga student or yoga therapy client, Krishnamacharya's forthright statement should be taken to heart. As a yoga teacher or **yoga therapist**, observe and be present with the student or client before beginning a session, rather than launching into a predetermined routine: are they breathing softly and naturally, or quickly and forcefully; is their speech rapid and disjointed, or is there perhaps an unusual silence and lack of communication; are the eyes forward and bright, or downcast and avoiding contact; are they willing and engaged, or reluctant and hesitant. Yoga is not a prescription, or a prescribed set of poses. It is a candid, daily observation of our truest Self—the inner state. If each practice is respectful of the state of the body and mind, then the yoga will be 'gentle' yoga.

Mindful Yoga

Just when we may have come to the conclusion that all gentle yoga is therefore mindful yoga, we take a step back. Synonyms for *mindful* include *alive, aware, cognizant, conscious, sensible, sentient*: Are we aware of what is beneficial for us, or even conscious of our inner state from moment to moment? We are alive, surely, and sentient, yet these in and of themselves do not constitute sensibility, knowledge and understanding. These attributes are gained through time, study, instruction, and reflection, regardless of the topic or form of study. So, too, in yoga. Again, Krishnamacharya puts it plainly and in context—"Practice without right knowledge of theory is blind. This is also because without right knowledge, one can mindfully do a wrong [yoga] practice."

Yoga Therapy

Yoga Therapy is traditionally described as **Yoga Cikitsa**, the practice of yoga for healing. Although yoga therapy is not yoga instruction per se, it can (and often does!) lead to a newfound sensitivity to one's state of mind, and awareness of the body in its unwelcome states of illness, discomfort, fatigue, or the welcome states of health, wellbeing, ease, and energy. A yoga therapy client essentially becomes a student of yoga through close observation of the Self, be it at the most basic physical level or at the deepest mental and emotional level. For some that shift begins unconsciously as an imperceptible change: a slight lessening of pain, being able to move a toe, or having a brighter outlook on life. Others experience dynamic change, reconnecting with their body years after the onset of neurological disease or cancer, or moving past depression and once again partaking in life.

This is the essence of a mindful, gentle, yoga practice— positive, profound and lasting change which heals, sustains.