



# PHYSICAL & SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

WORDS: SAMA QURIE. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF CORBIS

In celebration of *International Yoga Day* this month, we chart the path of this practice and walk through some basic positions to increase strength as well as alleviate stress.

**J**une 21 marks the first *International Yoga Day* following its appointment by the United Nations General Assembly late last year. Looking back over the thousands of years since the discipline first took form, it's impressive to see how it has evolved and become intensely popular worldwide. Nevertheless, the purpose at the heart of Yoga remains unchanged and it is these ideals that draw countless men and women to practice, or even dedicate their lives to it as yogis.

If you're feeling muscle pain, are prone to bouts of anxiety, deprived of sleep or you just want to relax, yoga is the perfect activity for you.

Discover how this popular practice came to life, a breakdown of different schools as well as its health and wellbeing benefits in our compendium.

## ACROSS THE MILLENIA

To understand yoga it's helpful to look back at what came before the modern form that fills gyms from Dubai to New York nowadays.

**Pre-Classical yoga:** Over 5,000 years ago, the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation in northern India developed the beginnings of Yoga. The word itself was first mentioned in one of the oldest sacred Hindu texts, *The Rigveda*. By around 1,500 BCE yoga was slowly being refined and developed by the Brahmin and Rishi cultures. These Hindu preachers, teachers, poets and sages schooled others in sacrificing the ego through self-knowledge, action (karma yoga) and wisdom (jnana yoga).

**Classical yoga:** This period is defined by the Samkhya philosopher Patanjali's

*Yoga Sūtras*. This text is understood to be the first systematic presentation of yoga. Written some time around 400 BCE, the text describes the path of raja yoga (classical yoga). Patanjali organised the practice into an "eight limbed path" containing a list of steps and stages towards obtaining samadhi (enlightenment). Patanjali is considered to be the father of yoga and his legacy continues to influence the majority of modern yoga styles.

**Post-Classical yoga:** A few centuries after Patanjali, yoga masters embraced the physical body as the means to achieve enlightenment. They created a system of practices designed to rejuvenate the body and prolong life including tantra yoga. This form drew on radical techniques to cleanse the body and mind in an effort to break the knots that bind people to their

physical existence. This exploration of these physical-spiritual connections and body-centered practices led to the creation of what we primarily think of as yoga: hatha yoga.

**Modern yoga:** In the late 1800s and early 1900s, yoga masters began to travel to the West, attracting attention and followers. One notable early introduction was at the *1893 Parliament of Religions* in Chicago, when Indian Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda wowed crowds with his lectures on yoga and the universality of the world's religions. The first hatha yoga school opened three decades later in Mysore, southern India. Yoga continued to be keenly taken up in small numbers throughout Europe and America until Russian Indra Devi opened her yoga studio in Hollywood in 1947. Since then, many more Western and Eastern teachers have become pioneers, popularising hatha yoga. Today this type encompasses many different schools or styles, all emphasising different aspects of the practice.

## FINDING FORMS

Each path of yoga leads toward its own special goal. Here are some of the most popular styles.

**Hatha:** In Sanskrit, “hatha” means force. It describes the physical practice of yoga, and therefore all types of yoga fall under this category. However if you see hatha yoga on a class schedule, it generally means you'll find a slower-paced class with a flow between each pose. It's a gentle class that's perfect for beginners or the after-work yogi looking to wind-down. Practicing hatha yoga will teach you basic postures, how to breath efficiently, relax and meditate. The higher purpose is to purify the body and gain awareness and control over your internal states.

**Vinyasa:** Meaning “connection” in Sanskrit, vinyasa links each movement with the inhale and exhale of each breath. It creates flowing postures that smoothly transition from one to the next. There are no specific formats or poses, which gives creativity to the teacher, however, you are likely to experience warrior poses, balancing positions as well as back bends and seated stretches, as well as end with a savasana (relaxation) pose. Classes can range from athletically oriented to the more relaxed and spiritual.



*An intermediate hatha yoga class*

**“IF YOU’RE FEELING MUSCLE PAIN OR YOU JUST WANT TO RELAX, YOGA IS THE PERFECT ACTIVITY FOR YOU”**

**Ashtanga:** Considered a modern-day form of classical Indian Yoga and also known as power yoga, movement and breath are again linked in ashtanga. Nevertheless, the difference to vinyasa is that movements are more strictly predefined. You will generally progress through four phases in ashtanga. Advancing through the poses can take years, however the important aspect of this form is to maintain internal focus rather than preoccupy yourself with advancement.

**Iyengar:** Unlike the aforementioned forms, the classes or this alignment-based style don't flow. Poses are held longer, as you breath into a pose to find more expansion. Practicing iyengar will help build strength, mobility and stability. Teachers of such classes will often use of a variety of props, such as blocks, straps,

and blankets, to make sure you achieve the correct posture of each pose. This style is especially attractive to individuals who appreciate detailed instruction, or for those with injuries and who need a class that can accommodate their limitations.

**Bikram:** This style is the best known for its sweltering settings and sweat-dripping postures. Bikram is ideally practiced in a room heated to 40°C with a humidity of 40 per cent. Creator, Bikram Choudhury, also developed vinyasa. For his namesake form, he composed 26 postures that are to be performed in a strict sequential order. These specific positions were selected because they are believed to systematically challenge the entire body – the organs, veins, ligaments and muscles.



## GETTING STARTED

### 1. Equipment required:

- A quality mat is a must. Find helpful hints for making your purchase at *Gaiam.com*.
- A well-fitting tank top without a plunging neckline, so that you can move your arms freely and won't be uncomfortable throughout the workout.
- Full or ¾ pants that are relatively form fitting or leggings that are lightweight, breathable and have lots of give when stretched so they won't rip or restrict you.
- A headband or hair tie to keep your hair out of your face; it will annoy you in many of the poses.
- Yoga blocks may also be used by beginners or those with prior injuries. They most often serve as an extension of the hands or are used to support the back, head and hips as well as encourage alignment.
- Other optional items include: yoga straps, which are wonderful for newbies or anyone wanting to deepen your practice, as well as yoga gloves and socks for more gripping power and to prevent slipping.

### 2. Several of Amman's main gyms offer yoga classes including the use of mats and other equipment. Alternatively, independent studios include:

- **Art of Living Foundation** at 6 May Ziadah Street in Jabal Amman, (079) 660 6746.
- **One with Nature Center** at 2 Ahmed Al Dayri Street, behind the Orthodox Club in Abdoun, (079) 622 3099.
- **Chi Center** on Al Thaqafa Street near Burger King in Shmeisani, (077) 810 1435.

### 3. If you don't like indoor yoga or routine bores you, follow *Facebook.com/YogaJordan*. This group regularly organises yoga events in outdoor spaces such as the Dead Sea or Bergesh Forest as well as promotes teachers and other classes.

### 4. If you want to do yoga at home, the DVD and online streaming possibilities, from free to subscription, are virtually endless. We are fans of:

- *Gaiam.com*, which has special sessions for beginners, runners, weight-loss, stress-relief or to improve your flexibility, to name a few.
- On Youtube, informative and motivational channels include: *Strala at Home*, *PsycheTruth* and *Yoga with Adriene*.
- If you prefer to have a physical copy, celeb tough-love trainer Jillian Michaels gives two, half-hour practices in her acclaimed fat-burning adaptation of the practice, *Yoga Inferno* DVD.

## WHY THE MANIA

Yoga builds muscle, ligament and tendon strength, while it also improves flexibility and balance simultaneously. Moreover, it perfects posture, which if poor, can cause back, neck or other debilitating muscle and joint issues. All of these benefits can improve performance in other physical activities and this has led many professional sportsmen and sportswomen to incorporate it into their training routines.

Mentally, yoga helps you focus and also better coordination, reaction time and memory. Practicing the meditative aspects of yoga encourages you to be less distracted by thoughts and everything around you. This helps to achieve a peaceful, calm state of mind and slows down the loops of frustration, regret, anger, fear and desire, which can cause a great amount of stress.

Because yoga is a gentle physical activity and easily adapted to each individual, it is suitable for everyone from children to the elderly. Older members of society are increasingly taking it up to improve poor blood circulation, high blood pressure, arthritis and osteoporosis.

Yoga is a wonderful prenatal practice and is also encouraged for post-pregnancy recovery. It calms both mind and body, providing the physical and emotional stress relief your body needs throughout both pregnancy and motherhood. Classes are especially popular because instructors can clarify any precautions required as well as monitor your performance. Furthermore, joining a prenatal yoga group is a great way to meet other mums-to-be.



Prenatal yoga

## STRIKE A POSE

### Downward-Facing Dog Pose

Adho Mukha Svanasana is great for strengthening the lower back and improving posture. Engage abs, so the back is straight, and focus on pulling shoulder blades together. Let the head hang neutrally and engage thigh muscles to further support the back.

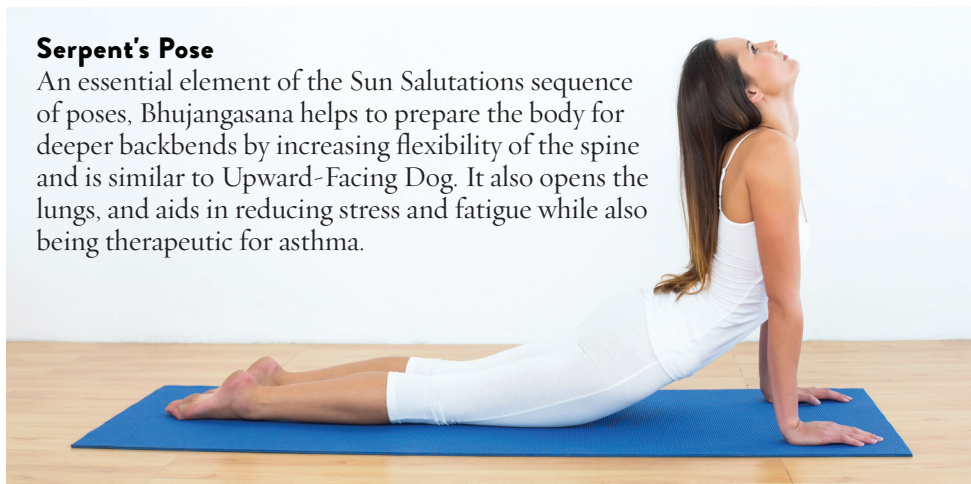


### Warrior 1 Pose

This is a powerful standing pose that develops stamina, balance and coordination. In Virabhadrasana, focus on your foundation and building the pose from the ground up to reduce distractions and hone your energy.

### Serpent's Pose

An essential element of the Sun Salutations sequence of poses, Bhujangasana helps to prepare the body for deeper backbends by increasing flexibility of the spine and is similar to Upward-Facing Dog. It also opens the lungs, and aids in reducing stress and fatigue while also being therapeutic for asthma.



### Child's Pose

Balasana is excellent for recovering after any strenuous activity. In child's pose, you can either rest arms by your sides or extend them out in front for a deeper stretch through the spine.



### Boat Pose

Navasana is great for core strength. This position tones the abdominal muscles while strengthening the lower back and can also improve digestion. Take care to keep the spine straight, without letting the lower back sag or chest collapse.



### Bridge Pose

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana works to open the chest and stretch the thighs. It also help if you suffer from anxiety because it deepens breaths to re-energise the body. As a beginner, it is best to keep heels on the floor and to maintain a straight line from knees to neck.



### Plank Pose

Stay five to 10 breaths in this simple but challenging Kumbhakasana pose to build upper body strength. Make sure to maintain good alignment throughout by not letting hips stick up or sag down. Rest in child's pose if needed.