

Seasons and Cycles of Yoga

What to do When

Keen yoga students want to do their own yoga practice, and probably will want to be able to practice through the many ups and downs and ins and outs of their lives.

Given that there are hundreds and probably thousands of yoga postures and practices, what does a student need to know about piecing together a practice for the different seasons of life? What adaptations and considerations might he or she need to think about?

“Well”, as the great Indian teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar is fond of saying, “It depends.”¹

It depends on your age, what season of the year, and even the time of day, as well as many other factors. Your energy levels, your emotional state, and your health all have bearing on what yoga practice you do, but these are also influenced by the stage of life you’re in.

One of the beauties of yoga is that it is so versatile. Rather than doing a static routine, you can do restorative poses when you’re depleted, postnatal yoga if you’ve had a baby, dynamic yoga when you’re ready to go for it, and breathing exercises, relaxation, and meditation for times of stress.

It makes sense that as we ebb and flow in our lives that we need to adapt and change our yoga practices to reflect what’s happening in the moment.

Let’s look at some of the variables involved in choosing your yoga practice, depending on your stage of life.

The traditional Hindu view of life identifies four stages called “ashrama”².

The first one is the youth/student stage from ages 8 to 25 years. This is when one is growing up and assimilating knowledge and values.

Next is the householder stage from ages 25 to 50 years, when one focuses on marriage, family, vocation, and civic responsibilities.

Then there’s the retirement stage around middle age. This is when one’s children are grown, but now there may be grandchildren. The demands of work may have decreased or stopped and one has time to be more inward. One is free to reflect on what lies beyond the mundane life.

Lastly, there’s the renunciate stage that is usually associated with old age (Actually, this stage can be entered into at any age). One is sometimes called a Sadhu or a Sannyasin and gives up family attachments and withdraws from society. The forest or cave dweller is the stereotype of this individual.

While these divisions have a slightly different spin in our modern day, we can use them as a kind of coat hanger on which to hang appropriate yoga practices.

Children, Teenagers and 20's

Youth these days, more than ever, can benefit from doing yoga. Young people usually have plenty of energy, but we see a growing tendency to be sedentary and “screen-oriented” – obsessed with the Internet, television, game boys, and SMS messaging.

Fortunately, in recent times, children's yoga has become very popular, even starting with preschoolers. The kind of yoga kids do has got to be playful, energetic and fast moving because of kids' relatively short attention-spans. Kids' yoga can be based on playing games, like “Statues” where children imitate yoga animals; or they can be taken on imaginary adventures where yoga poses get woven into stories that the kids act out.

Practice in breathing can be introduced even at this early stage. Teaching children to “take five long breaths” can turn grizzly, disconnected kids into a more cooperative yoga group.

It may take several months of practice for pre-schoolers to get established in doing yoga relaxations. But, once they get on to it, they'll choose doing a relaxation over, say, playing a game.

By learning yoga so early, a child is introduced to the notions of looking after self and other. He or she also learns to listen to the body by bringing attention to whether something hurts or feels good. Kids can tune into what they're energy levels are like in the moment and adjust their physical activity accordingly.³

Teenage energy can oscillate pretty wildly at times. When the famous Indian teachers B.K.S.Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois were teenagers, they first learned yoga from their guru, T. Krishnamacharya. He gave them a rigorous yoga practice which included “jumpings” – literally jumping from one posture to the next in salutes-to-the-sun for perhaps a couple of hours. This was kind of practice their guru deemed appropriate to channel youthful male energy.

Yoga postures offer great help at puberty when a girl first begins to menstruate. Seated forward bends done during the period time bring pure blood to the pelvic region. Variations of *supta baddha konasana* reduce cramping. As a young woman, she can learn to listen to the signals of her body and accept her womanhood more comfortably through doing menstrual sequences.

Many high schools wisely offer yoga classes through their physical education departments. Since students are spending long hours studying for exams and working and playing at computers, they have much tighter bodies than one would expect of people their age. While they have to work at regaining flexibility through doing *asana* practice, they seem to take to the yoga relaxations very naturally.

The mental space yoga relaxations give young people offer a respite from daily stresses. These include emotional and physical changes of adolescence, and the pressure cooker atmosphere of school exams and assessments. A teenager who learns concentration, body awareness, and relaxation will have valuable skills as he or she shifts into adulthood and the householder stage of life.

Young people in their 20's these days are often still living in their family home. Still this is a time when they are stimulated by new ideas, are pursuing higher education, and maybe embarking on overseas travelling. If their interest in yoga has been piqued earlier, they may want to experiment and try different kinds of yoga practices.

Householder

These days, rather than the householder stage we could call the early part of this next stage the thirty-somethings. It's the time for setting up a home and assuming responsibilities of marriage and having children, community projects, and building a career.

Regarding having children, many women come to yoga for the first time when they're pregnant. They want to foster their well being all through pregnancy and to have a good labour and delivery.

Working with a knowledgeable teacher, the mother-to-be will do poses tailored to each trimester. Doing standing poses all through pregnancy helps a woman cultivate the stamina and strength, especially in her legs, that she will need for labour. Sitting poses, such as baddha konasana and upavistha konasana facilitate flexibility and openness, particularly in the hips and pelvic floor area.

A huge benefit to a pregnant woman is the quiet times in yoga practice when she can feel the baby within her and commune with it.

If the mother-to-be has learned the lessons of letting go and breathing through difficult poses, she'll be better equipped to face each painful contraction of birth. If she's learned to relax in Savasana, she'll make good use of the respites between uterine contractions of labour to rest and conserve energy.

Being able to do restorative poses, yoga breathing and relaxation in any free time after the baby is born, helps a new mother to recharge her body and lift her spirits. Often the positive yoga experience that she has had in pregnancy motivates her to get back to yoga classes soon. Because she's learned yoga in her prenatal classes, now she can also do her yoga practice at home when the baby is quiet. Even just 15 minutes of asanas or relaxation practice done just for herself is worthwhile.

People in the householder stage like the challenge of strong physical yoga. But, at the same time, working to be successful can take its toll. A yoga practice that combines the

physical aspect with doing yoga breathing (pranayama) and quiet meditation periods can bring balance back into one's life. Pranayama and meditation help keep one's metabolism on an even keel and encourage a calm, detached view. It means one can advance a career and not lose track of why one is doing it.

Middle Age

Ideally as people move into middle age, they now have the time to do some of the things that they were too preoccupied to do before, like taking up yoga. One can turn attention to creating health of body and mind from a place of centeredness because one has more space in one's life.

At this time, one might begin to notice physical imbalances that were never addressed before and are coming to the surface. Often now, people who have suffered stress sports injuries, look to yoga as a way to work with them. Specialised remedial yoga routines can re-align asymmetries and fix old injuries.

Yoga, as we've seen, is an activity that can be done at any age so even those who have not done any exercise at all in their lives can join a beginners course and progress at their own pace.

Middle-aged people who have been doing yoga for years will probably find they need to modify the yoga practice they've been doing. There can be physical and emotional changes that require them to do more basic yoga practice. Loss of flexibility and joint mobility may mean that a practice like "pawanmuktasana"⁴ is required on a daily basis. These joint-freeing exercises promote internal health and increase energy (prana) even for those who suffer from some joint degeneration.

Along with this sort of specialised practice, middle age is the time to begin to de-emphasise the physical side and turn more and more to pranayama and meditation practices. In this time when the definition of self is changing, doing more of the introverted yoga practices will allow time and space for discovering the balance within.

If you've never thought about studying the philosophy and history of yoga, this might have some appeal now. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra⁵ will have more relevance for people who have rich life experience to compare with the yoga philosophy. An ancient text, the "Bhagavad-Gita"⁶ addresses issues such as one's duty in life, what it takes to live ethically, the right relationship to have with regard to worldly attachments, and how to quiet the mind.

For women, middle age is the time of menopause. The sheer numbers of baby boomers hitting the menopause brings attention to this life stage. One estimate says that in the next 15 years, 40 million women will go through menopause in the United States alone.

The good news for menopausal women is that there are special postures and approaches to yoga to help women manage some of the difficult symptoms of this time. One can do cooling yoga poses, like the seated forward stretches, and pranayamas to help with hot flushes. Dr. Gita S. Iyengar⁷ is an authority on this woman's stage and teaches sequences to help soothe the nervous system and correct imbalances in the endocrine system.

The right sort of yoga practice means a woman can make the transition to becoming an elder with the support she needs in facing the physiological, psychological, and emotional stresses that arise.

Seniors and Old Age

It's never too late to take up yoga. B.K.S. Iyengar says he began to teach yoga to the Queen Mother of Belgium when she was 84 years old, although she had never done it before.

Retirees are often as busy when they stop working as before because they take up volunteering or some sort of social service. This is as it should be as they can share their rich experiences and skills. We can expect to keep on working longer in the future, so yoga is more necessary than ever to keep a life in balance.

However, yoga practice must match an older person's anatomy, physiology, and psyche.

Yoga keeps an older person fit, flexible, and strong through doing an active asana practice, but one's level of energy can fluctuate. The renowned American mythologist, Joseph Campbell said of himself in his eighties, "I have more mass than energy!"⁸ If one has learned the more meditative practices of yoga, then it's possible to turn into subtler underlying currents of energy. This trains one to have more refined levels of perception. You are aware of your needs and can manage your energy better.

In this stage of life, often it is the restorative poses that are very much needed and wanted. Judith Lasater, the doyenne of "Relax and Renew"⁹ poses, extols *supta baddha konasana*, *viparita karani*, and "the mountain brook pose" – a supine pose where the body is draped in a wave-like pattern over blankets and a bolster.

The good thing about taking up yoga later in life is that one has more at stake. Older people know that if they don't do yoga practice that the mental and physical health they want to maintain will be lost very quickly. So, they tend to be slower, steadier, and more persistent in their yoga practice.

Adults who take up yoga almost invariably say they wish they'd started at an earlier age. This is because the more one deepens one's yoga practices on all levels, the more the ease and freedom gained on the mat flows into the rest of one's life.

Ultimately, at any age, the healthy practices you do for yourself, such as asana, pranayama, relaxation, study of yoga philosophy carry over to your family and friends, and even the public sphere.

Yoga is, after all, a life training. You build up muscles for taking care of yourself on all levels – body, mind, and spirit. The energy you generate for yourself and your own healing can be directed outwards towards humanity and the planet.

¹ T.K.V. Desikachar's book "Heart of Yoga" is an excellent tool for developing a personal practice, based on the organisational principle of "vinyasa krama". As an added bonus, the book contains "The Yoga Sutra" of Patanjali, the venerable sage who codified ancient Vedic teaching. You could also look at "Teach Yourself Yoga" by Eve Grzybowski for ways of motivating yourself to do self-practice.

² "Ashrama" - Often reduced to "ashram" in modern Indian languages, ashrama refers to any of the four stages in the ideal life of a classical Hindu. Namely: brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, and sannyasa. Not to be confused with the notion of a community of like-minded individuals.

³ There are a few books on children's yoga around at the moment. Here's one: "The complete idiot's guide to yoga with kids" by Jodi B. Komitor and Eve Adamson .

⁴ Two great sources for the "pawanmuktasana" exercises are: "Asana, Pranayama, Mudra Bandha" by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and "Structural Yoga Therapy" by Mukunda Stiles.

⁵ An excellent book on Patanjali's "Yoga Sutra" is "The Essence of Yoga" by Bernard Bouanchaud. The goal of this book is particularly oriented towards freeing the reader from "past conditioning...in the mirror of yoga."

⁶ For everything you ever wanted to know about the "Bhagavad-Gita", try the Internet - www.gita.society.com

⁷ Geeta S. Iyengar's "Yoga – A Gem for Women" is generally considered a yoga bible for information on all stages of a woman's life.

⁸ A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living" also talks about the stages of life. (p. 41):

"The first half of life
we serve society—engagement.
The second half of life
We turn inward—disengagement."

⁹ Judith Lasater, "Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times"

