

Your e-book companion to the online course

A new yoga

STEFAN CAMILLERI
YOGA



Written during a perfect Sri Lankan curfew 2020

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Introduction to A New Yoga e-book

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First edition written in 2020

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INTRODUCTION AND HELLO

Welcome

Welcome to the e-book companion of the 'Introduction to a new yoga' course. I'm very thankful you've decided to join and am delighted to be able to share my passion with you online.



If you're reading through this without doing the full online course, you can skip the rest of this introduction and go straight to chapter one now. Although I do recommend that to get the most out of this book you consider doing the course as well!

For those who are part of the course, I have a few recommendations to help you get the most from this document before you start.

Firstly, make sure you've already read through the course guide, which gives you an overview of all the course content, so you know what you'll be working through over the coming days and weeks.

Secondly, I have set an order for each module with lecture videos, practice videos, reading assignments and revision questions at the end, all summarised in the course outline. I recommend following this order.

Third, try to resist the urge to jump around between the modules. Instead, stay with one and complete all the content before moving on to the next. It might be tempting at times to just work

with the learning style you like most. If you're an avid reader, for example, you may read the whole e-book in one sitting. That's kind of impressive for sure, but not the best way to digest the content. So again, try to keep the learning *module-specific* and work through one section at a time.

Finally, and very importantly, let studying this course be an enjoyable experience! I will do my best to keep you happy and entertained, but it can't all be jokes, and to be fair, I'm not a very good comic. The responsibility is yours to stay engaged. It will also help you to be well rested and free from distractions as you work through the material.

STEFAN CAMILLERI

About me and my approach



Let me add some explanation for my (at times very different) approach. I wouldn't want to study medicine with a doctor who got their certificate from a cereal box, and you likely feel the same about your yoga teacher.

So, hey! My name is Stefan, and I do a lot of yoga. I've delved so deeply into the different aspects of the practice that I've managed to find the limits of my body and, at times, ended up with injuries. That has taught me a lot.

I started my journey with very fashionable

vinyasa yoga in Melbourne. After studying my first teacher training at The Australian Yoga Academy, I was convinced about the 'power of the breath' and how important it was to have killer playlists. To be fair, the training was a comprehensive introduction, but I needed more.

My first real revolution came through meeting the completely mad and truly incredible Sadie Nardini, who transformed the way that I moved and practised almost overnight. I was lucky enough to study and

assist with her for about a year, giving an in-depth insight into a fascinating way of approaching modern yoga.

The second revolution happened when I travelled to India for the first time in 2014. I spent three months practising with some great teachers who challenged my already surprisingly entrenched belief system. I would go on to travel to India another six times, every year since, to study more with amazing teachers like Pakej, Ashish Sharma and the world-famous Usha Devi. I got hooked on the discipline, in-depth alignment and structure offered by Iyengar yoga.

My most recent revolution came through the persistent injuries I attained from working too hard and rigidly in my alignment practice. I tried and failed to solve these issues with more of the same, which didn't work. At this time I had a lucky encounter with yoga teacher and Yoga Synergy founder Simon Borg Olivier. I first came into contact with his content online before practising with him for a weekend in Perth when we both happened to be there. Simon's practices helped me immensely, and within one weekend, he revolutionised my thinking on yoga and more.

Since then, I've been studying as much as I can with Simon. I recently completed his 200hr training in Goa, as well as completing all of the Yoga Synergy online courses.

So, this is where I am with my practice, my understanding and my teaching now. I've been informed by what we could call pop-vinyasa yoga, Sadie Nardini's fascinating approach, a massive detour into Iyengar and alignment and now Simon's radical approach

and practices. I haven't forgotten my roots or the crucial lessons learnt between my first yoga class and now. I will always share with you the most up to date ideas and best solutions available to me even when these new ideas contradict what I may have taught before.

Essential beliefs that inform these courses

I believe that yoga practice should always:

- Be healing to the body and mind
- Be in general a relaxing practice
- Be enjoyable and fun
- Take into consideration all the latest available knowledge
- Be respectful to the philosophy and history of yoga
- Be built around individual needs

I believe yoga should never:

- Injure or compromise its student's health or wellbeing
- Leave people more stressed than when they arrived
- Be uninformed and out of date
- Be stuck in ridged lineage
- Be guru focused
- Be based on dogma

My beliefs significantly informed my approach to teaching and learning, and therefore what we will be covering in this, and subsequent courses. I hope that this new approach comes as a breath of fresh air, you learn lots, and most importantly, you enjoy.

THE COURSE OUTLINE

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3. How to practice well

Learning outcomes for this module

- To be able to have a safe, fun, relaxing and enjoyable yoga practice at home, or when participating in someone else's classes either in real life or online.
- This module will cover briefly how to use the body safely and functionally whenever you practise.
- This module will also teach you how to breathe for the maximum advantage on and off the mat.

3.1 Goals of the practice

There are countless reasons to practise yoga. To clarify why we bother to practise at all, let's look into three simple categories:

Reason one. Yoga.

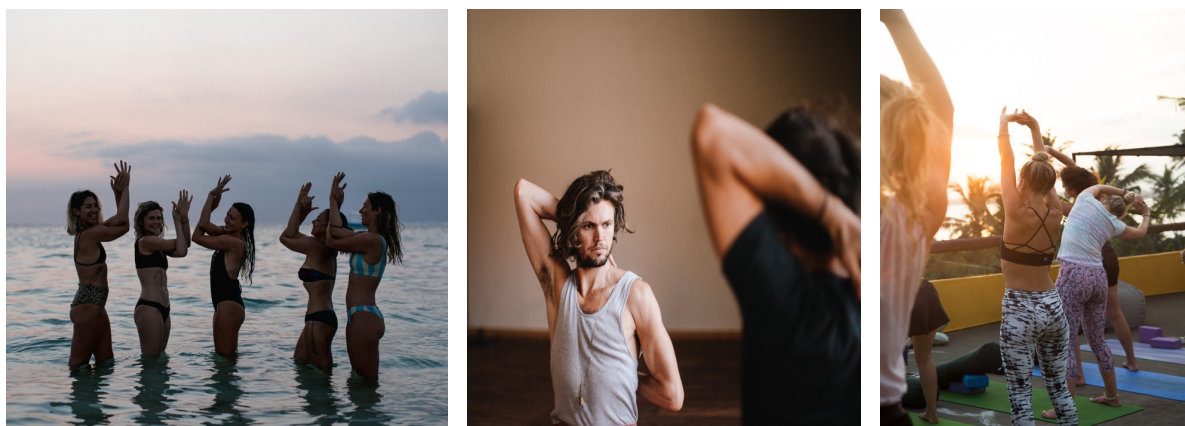
The objectives of yoga are outlined by the philosophical discussions we had in chapter two. With these ideas in mind, we use the principles of yoga philosophy to guide our physical practice. Our yoga then becomes a dynamic meditation, a mindfulness practice, and not a fitness routine.

We practise yoga to learn more about ourselves and work towards some sort of self-realisation. With this mindset, we must practise with objectivity and observe our reactions, our efforts, and our strengths and weaknesses. With this mindset, we can experience profound learning in each practice. Your practice will not always be fun and enjoyable. The work of self-development could, at times, be hard work. The practice of yoga was not designed to be fun; it was designed to be profound.

Reason two. Boga.

Boga? Boga is a term from the tantric traditions meaning to act in pursuit of sensory pleasure, or simply put; to enjoy. To experience boga, you should practise in a way that gives you the most fun and enjoyment. Boga might mean doing only your favourite postures, moving in a way that *feels* good, or rewarding yourself with sequences that your body might not need, but you like.

The danger of boga is excess. In just doing what feels right, you risk overdoing and creating imbalance in the body. The unfortunate truth about always doing what feels good, is that in the long run, it tends to cause problems. Regrettably, most modern yoga practice should be called boga. It's understandable, of course, as people want to feel good. But rewarding yourself all the time might not be the best solution for a holistic life, and for sure it won't help much with self-realisation.



Reason three. Physical, physiological or mental therapy.

We might be practising yoga to try to fix problems with our body, our physiology or even our mental state. You might have started yoga to create strength or flexibility or help heal a dodgy knee, a bad ankle or a crook lower back. Or maybe you use yoga as a way to de-stress and give some sort of mental therapy, calm the nervous system or clear the mind. Maybe you heard that yoga helps regulate digestion, or improves immune function. You might even practise yoga to help with mental health issues or emotional regulation.

Using yoga as therapy is not wrong; a well-guided practice should be therapeutic. The difference between yoga and therapy is that yoga philosophy suggests everything is perfect the way it is, and we just need to realise this. And if you are genuinely in the present moment, any physical or mental issues are irrelevant. Therapy suggests there is something wrong that needs fixing and is the attempt to correct these issues.

What do you practice?

There are all sorts of reasons to practise yoga, and they are all equally valid. The truth is that for most people, their 'yoga' practice is boga and an attempt at musculoskeletal therapy. Most people, myself included, start yoga to help improve bodies and minds. And those of us who stayed on long enough, are the ones who find it enjoyable to practise, (boga). It is only those who dig a little deeper, as you might be for doing this course, who will start to find the real yoga.

Finding the ideal combination

Does this mean as evolved practitioners, we should all shun the fun and enjoyable parts of our practice? Should we shy away from all the things that give therapy to help our minds and bodies? I would say a very strong no.

I believe that we should use this information to recognise that there are different elements to our yoga practice. In understanding this, we can then find a way to get a little bit of all three each time we approach the yoga mat.

Why not start every yoga practice with a bit of mindful therapy? Do the exercises that help you

and your body improve physically and feel good. Why don't you then continue into a part of your practice that you enjoy, the boga? Finally, make sure that at some point you are working with the ideas of philosophical yoga, the practice of mindfulness and self-realisation.

The best solution is to mix these three concepts into every movement of your yoga practice (and maybe one day your life.) In doing this, your whole practice could be therapeutic, enjoyable and importantly, an experience of yoga.

3.2 Using our body well in yoga

There are some essential principals you need to follow to get the most of the yoga you practise. Following these principals will help you better access the present moment and experience more yoga. They will help you enjoy your time more to experience boga. Finally, and significantly, these guidelines will help you look after yourself better and achieve improved therapy.

Don't overdo it

Arguably the most common cause of injuries in modern yoga classes comes from working too hard or doing too much. Many yoga practitioners, through their dedication and enthusiasm, work far too hard, chasing intense sensations in their body as they practise. Doing this creates too much tension which stops the 'yoga,' and increases potential for injury. Let's look at the elements of overdoing it more specifically:

Overstretching is when you feel an intense sensation of stretch, the muscle has gone tense to resist your intended movement. This isn't the best way to create flexibility, and it has the added disadvantage of causing stress and opening up the possibility of injury when done in excess.

Over-tensing is when you harden your muscles too much. This happens in two ways and has a long list of disadvantages. First, it is when you work one muscle (or muscle group) too hard, usually from over effort. Second, when you tense muscles that you don't need - for example, using all the core muscles in a pose, rather than just the ones which are needed. Over-tensing will only make your practice more difficult, open you up to the potential for injury and make you feel stressed.

Over-breathing is when you breathe more than you need for a specific action or exercise, the technical term is hyperventilation. Although temporarily it can make you feel a little elevated, it's not a sustainable high. Over-breathing has a hormonal response similar to coffee or cocaine, releasing fight or flight hormones that push the body into the stress response. Think about it for a second: old or sick people breathe a lot when doing simple things. Athletes and the most fit around us breathe as little as possible when doing challenging things. Don't be like a sick person, be like an athlete.

To get the most yoga, enjoyment and therapy from our practise, we must avoid overdoing it; we

need to do less. So, resist the urge to over-tense, over-stretch, and over-breathe and try to take it easy.

Moving smart

Moving between one pose and another is the most dangerous moment of your yoga practise, while also offering the most potential for benefit when done well. Taking time to refine and improve your movements, therefore, is time well spent.

Here is a list of simple ideas for moving better:

Move actively

The most important principle is to move actively from one pose to another. For example, to move the leg, the muscles of the leg need to do the work, not the arm muscles as you put the leg into a different position. Always avoid moving into different shapes by pushing, pulling, using momentum or gravity. Rather, use your muscles and learn to move actively. Doing this gives you strength and flexibility, and makes your practice feel and look more beautiful.

Breathe naturally

Don't force the breath, and breathe naturally. During movement and postures in your practice, there is often a temptation to control the breath, inhaling and exhaling at specific times. Doing this makes it harder for the body to move correctly, and tends to lead to hyperventilation. So instead, as you practice, simply breathe normally, in a calm and relaxed way, ideally into the abdomen. Avoid the temptation to breathe consciously and spend your attention on more important things like where to relax or lengthen.



Move from your core

All movements should start from the centre of your body, *the core*. The core is a term used to describe an imaginary spot between the belly button and the pubic bone in the middle of the body. We don't need to tense here, as that causes excess tension and can cause more harm than good. Instead, if you are twisting to the right, the twist should start from your core. If you are lifting your hands, this movement should also start from the core. Folding forward? The core again, get it? Your core should lead every movement, in as relaxed a state as possible. The *core strengthening* comes from the relaxation and control that allows the correct muscles to fire.

Move fluidly

All movements should be like a beautiful dance, as jerky movements lead to injuries, don't feel good and don't express 'yoga' either. Rather than moving harshly from one position to the next, try and make your movements flowing and circular. Move without any sudden stops or reverse gears, and instead, move like you are practising Qi gong or doing a beautiful dance.

Understanding nerve reflexes

Although seldom spoken about, it's vital to understand the three primary nerve reflexes that can affect our yoga practice. Armed with this information, you'll find it easier to create length in your body without strong stretching, and strength in your muscles without over tensing.

What is a *nerve reflex*? A reflex when something happens in our body automatically without conscious control. A good example is how we pull away from surprisingly hot or cold objects instantaneously before we even realise what has happened. The following nerve reflexes are not conscious because they happen at the level of the spine. The signals never make it to the brain and happen all with the neurons within the muscle and the spine.

The first reflex is the **stretch reflex**, (the technical term is the *myotatic reflex*). The rule of this is that whenever a muscle lengthens near the nervous systems pre-set 'maximum range', it tenses to prevent you from moving further. It might be hard to believe, but a lack of muscular flexibility isn't about the length of the flesh, rather, it is how long the nervous system *thinks* the muscles should be. As soon as this limit is crossed, the body reacts by tensing it to prohibit it from moving any further.

The second reflex is called the **relaxation reflex**, (the technical term is the *inverse myotatic reflex*). The rule is that after some time of the stretch reflex, usually 12 to 20 seconds, the body realises you are safe, and probably really wants to move more, and relaxes the muscle to allow more movement. This is one of the reasons that in traditional yoga you often had to hold poses for between 20 or 30 seconds as this was enough time for this reflex to kick in and release the muscular tension.

The last is arguably the most relevant to this kind of yoga and is the **reciprocal reflex**, (technically

called *reciprocal inhibition*.) This rule is that when a muscle on one side of a joint is active, the opposite muscle will relax to allow the movement. For example, if you want to lengthen your hamstrings, you can tense your quadriceps to help this happen. Your yoga teacher might tell you to tense the front of your leg when folding forward for this same reason. It's a vital reflex to understand and take advantage for safe and physically effective yoga.



Relaxation as a superpower, consider what not to do

We are often focused on what we should make tense while practising yoga. Often forgotten about, is what parts of the body we should be relaxing. There are two reasons learning to relax can be of great help to your yoga. First, the advantage gained when you learn to relax specific muscle groups that are getting in the way - for example, when trying to lengthen your hamstrings, it helps to consciously relax them as well.

The second reason learning to relax in some ways while doing even the most challenging asana is that this will help you move into a calm physiological and mental state as well. When muscles are unconsciously tense, other systems in your body respond in fight or flight, as tension usually means a threat is present. Therefore, when you can release unnecessary stress from your muscles, you can alter your state to be more relaxed and positively affect your whole physiology.

Keeping in mind that any unnecessary muscular tension creates stress and makes poses more challenging to perform, it's useful to study this list of places where we are often too tense and can afford to relax in almost any moment:

- Your face
- Your jaw
- Your tongue
- Your eyes
- Your pelvic floor muscles

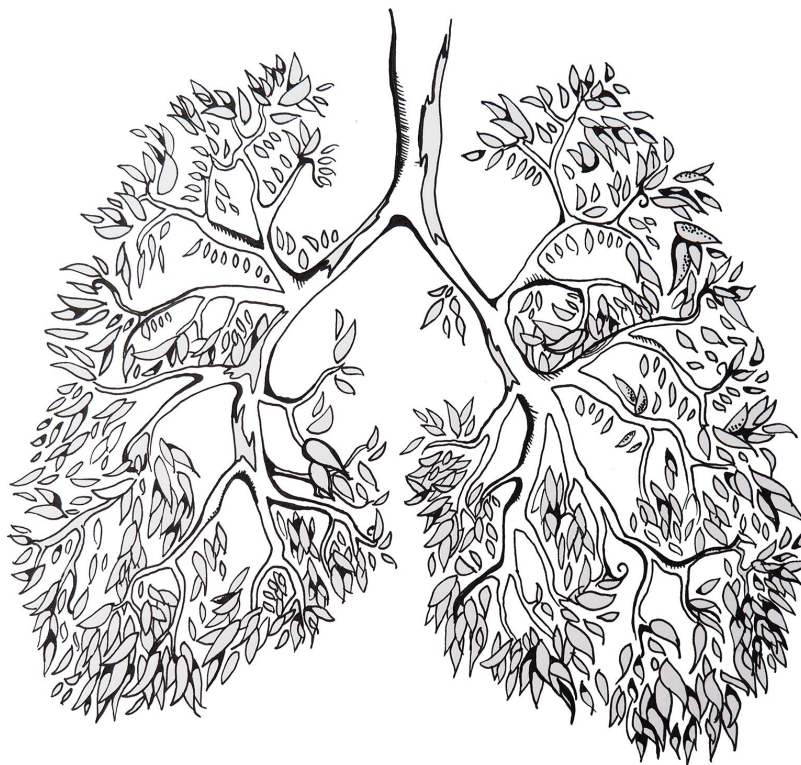
The above is a great start that you can do in any pose to make it feel more relaxed and maybe even more potent. The list below includes areas that rather than entirely relaxing, you can make sure that there is the potential for movement:

- Check your fingers are lengthened and can move
- Check your shoulders can roll
- Check your head and neck are free
- Check your hips can move
- Check that your belly can breathe

3.3 The basics of the breathing

Breathing is the most obvious link between conscious and unconscious that we have access to. Proper breathing is vital to a healthy life, and yoga practice offers us a unique opportunity to develop and refine it.

To do this, we will briefly look at two essential elements of breathing. First, how to improve your breathing technique. That is, how to use the mechanism of breathing to make a positive effect on the rest of your physiology. Second, we will talk about something often misunderstood, and that is, how much should we breathe. Here, I will continue the argument that breathing less is probably better for you



Breathing well

Breathing with correct technique is simple. Firstly, always breathe through the nose to filter and humidify the breath, allowing it to be more efficiently utilised by the lungs. Secondly, always breathe with the effort of the diaphragm; the bowl-shaped muscle under the ribs. Using this muscle forces the belly to expand on the in-breath, and relax back in on the out-breath.

Natural and healthy breathing should be easy, relaxed and effortless. For a fit person, the healthiest inhalation is often the one that requires the least effort and thought.

It's important to know that poor breathing technique is widespread, and for many people, time spent refining their technique is necessary.

Breathing less

Something not spoken about enough is how much is best to breathe. In many yoga classes, teachers often encourage their students to breathe more, inevitably causing hypoventilation and stress. The healthy amount of air to breathe for an average person is the equivalent of one full inhale and exhale per minute. We breathe a lot more than once a minute, don't we? Even when relaxed, most people breathe somewhere between 10 and 20 breaths a minute, but these are not full breaths, these are tiny breaths, equivalent to between 5 and 10% of our capacity per breath. This is called tidal breathing.

When our teachers guide our respiration in class; 'inhale arms up, exhale fold-down etc.' we tend to take full breaths. If we do, we breathe way more than we need and hyperventilate. This isn't a good thing and can cause a host of physiological issues like irritability, an imbalance in our blood PH, increased appetite and more.

There are a host of good arguments about the benefits of breathing less. The solution though is simple and that is to breathe no more than usual in your yoga and life.

Questions

1. Briefly explain the difference between the practice of 'yoga,' 'boga' and 'therapy'.
2. How should you breathe when practising physical yoga?