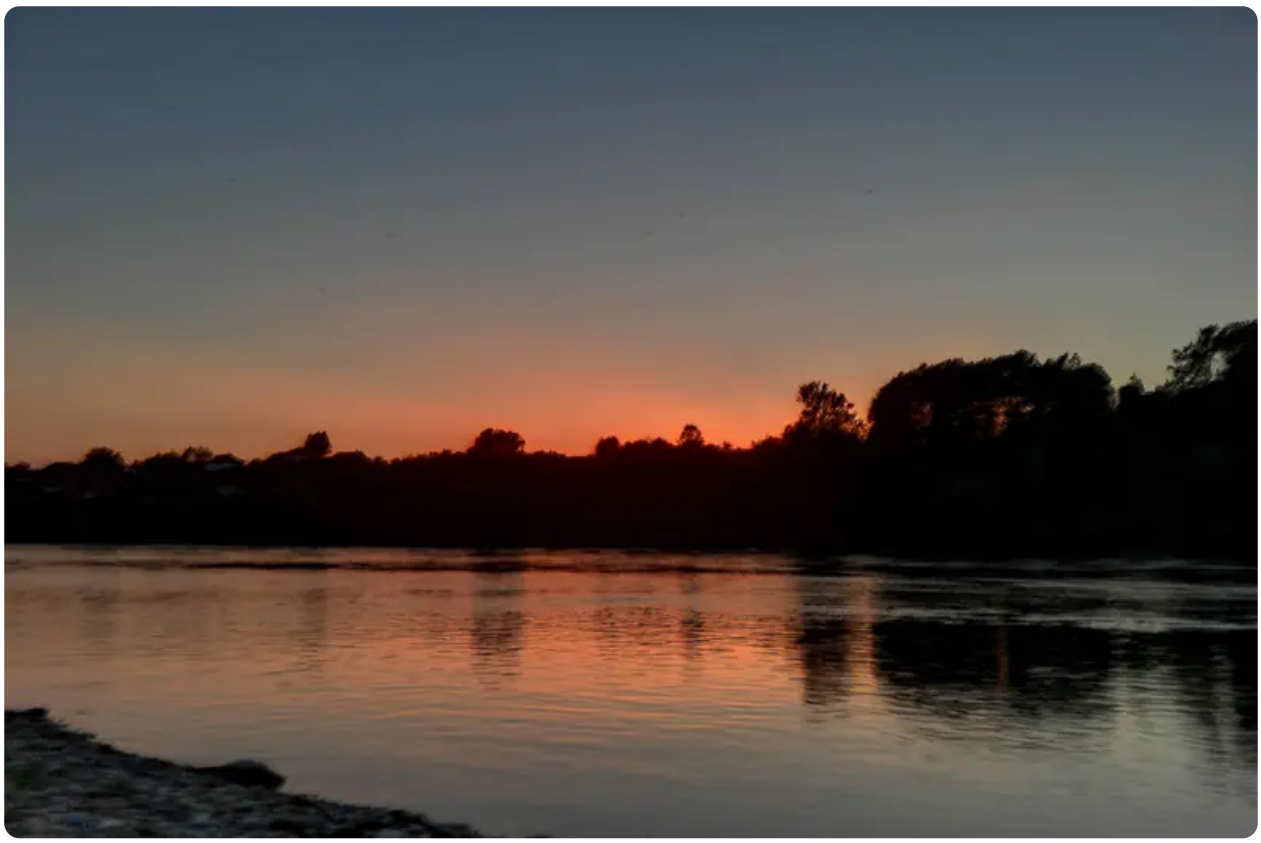
Asana yoga

Body postures · Yoga Loznica · 15 January 2020

Asanas are body postures that we hold with attention and breath. Here is what they do for the body and how to practise them.



> **Note.** We practise asanas without pain and within our abilities; with injuries and in pregnancy we adapt them. Chakras and energy centres are concepts of traditional yoga.

Yoga practice has three parts: directing attention, breathing and body postures, the **asanas**. They are practised together: attention without posture and breath has no strength, and posture without attention is only stretching. The main aim of asanas is to direct attention evenly into all parts of the body and so develop balance in what we experience as pleasant and unpleasant [1].

> ***Practising asanas leads to an experience of peace and wholeness, because through them we get to know our own essence.***

What asanas do for the body

The body is a set of systems that work together, and asanas act on them in different ways [5]:

- **Musculoskeletal system:** muscles grow stronger and joints more mobile. In most outcomes yoga was as good as exercise or better, except for physical fitness [2].
- **Respiratory system:** deep, conscious breath moves the lungs down to their base, and breathing becomes more even [5].
- **Cardiovascular system:** after practice the pulse and blood pressure come down [4][5].
- **Nervous system:** attention on the body calms thoughts. After three months of yoga mood improved and anxiety fell more than after walking, with a rise in GABA, a calming messenger in the brain [3].
- **Endocrine system:** yoga lowers cortisol, the stress hormone released by the adrenal glands [4]. The endocrine system keeps the work of the other systems in step, so when the stress hormones settle, the heart, the breath and the thoughts settle more easily.

What the research says

A review of 81 studies on yoga, 35 of which compared yoga with other exercise, shows that in most outcomes yoga does not fall behind ordinary exercise [2]. In a trial with 34 healthy participants, after 12 weeks of yoga (three times a week, an hour each) mood improved and anxiety fell more than in a group that walked for the same time [3]. A review of 42 trials linked practising asanas with lower cortisol, blood pressure and heart rate [4].

The trial [3] had 19 yoga participants and 15 who walked, and the improvement in mood was linked with a rise in GABA in the thalamus. According to the authors of the review [5], regular practice strengthens the muscles, increases flexibility, improves breathing and heart function and reduces stress.

How we practise

- **Floor and mat.** We practise on a firm floor, on a mat that is not too soft or springy. In the Indian tradition everyone has their own mat.
- **Begin calmly.** Before the first asana, sit, breathe in and feel your body.
- **Close your eyes** in most exercises: we then feel the link between mind and body more strongly. The exception is balance exercises, where the eyes need a point to hold on to.
- **Regular and conscious.** Regular practice, even breathing and attention to what we are doing bring progress.
- **Practise with someone.** It is easier when someone guides us; classes are online, and live by arrangement in Loznica.

Attention and sensations

Yoga teaches us to direct attention better, and that helps in everyday life too. It is a skill that is trained gradually: first attempts need not succeed, and repetition strengthens trust in our own abilities.

In an asana, attention goes to the part of the body that is in the foreground. We do not picture it as an image; we feel it: warmth, weight, stretch, tingling, the breath in that part. In this way everyone develops, in their own way, a feeling for their own organism [1].

When we are cold, for example, conscious relaxation and careful, small movements can bring warmth. There is no greater joy than winning over ourselves [1].

Breath and prana

In the yoga tradition breath is linked with **prana**[1]. It is said that “prana follows attention”, which in practice means that we follow the breath and the sensation in the part of the body that is in the foreground. We gain most when we follow the breath, hold the posture and feel different parts of the body at the same time.

If we make breathing a conscious act and follow the movement of air in the lungs, over time we develop a feeling for the fine flow of breath in the body. The yoga tradition also describes chakras [2]: where there is less attention and movement, “energy” flows more weakly. These are concepts of traditional yoga, and yoga is a means to balance and well-being.

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

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Notes

1. Prana (Sanskrit *prāṇa*) means breath, inhaling and exhaling; in a figurative sense, the breath of life. In Hindu philosophy it denotes the cosmic life energy. ↩
2. Chakra (Sanskrit *cakra*, “wheel”) denotes an energy centre in the body in the yoga tradition. The system of seven chakras is traditionally linked with the position of the major glands of the endocrine system. ↩

This text is for information. Latest version: https://yogaloznica.dkd.rs/asana-yoga.html