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Welcome to Yoga

Namaste! I look forward to being your guide as you explore yoga over the next 6 weeks.

This information is provided for new students who have practiced little (if any) yoga previously, to help you understand what to expect.

Preparing for your first class

Yoga is best practiced on any empty stomach. The first few classes of the introductory course will be very gentle, however as we progress you may find it increasingly uncomfortable to have eaten prior to class. I suggest you eat at least 2 hours prior to class if possible.

Wear stretchy or loose fitting clothes suitable for exercise. Yoga is done in bare feet, so wear shoes that are easy to slip on and off, and if you have long hair, tie it up.

While there are a few mats available to borrow, we recommend you bring your own yoga mat if you have one. We also have mats and yoga props (eye pillows, straps and blocks) available for purchase.

If the weather is cool you may wish to bring a shawl or light blanket for the relaxation session. If it is warm, a bottle of water is a good idea.

Hatha yoga

We will be practicing traditional hatha yoga. Hatha yoga is one of the original 'mother' forms of yoga. It is a gentle yet powerful form of yoga, which emphasises the body, mind, breath connection.

Hatha represents opposing energies: hot and cold (fire and water, following similar concept to yin-yang), male and female, positive and negative. Hatha yoga attempts to balance mind and body through physical postures (or asanas), purification practices, controlled breathing, and the calming of the mind through relaxation and meditation. Asanas teach poise, balance and strength and are practiced to improve the body's physical health and clear the mind in preparation for meditation.

Class structure

Classes will tend to follow a similar general structure each week, though within this structure different exercises will be introduced to explore different parts of the breath and the body.

Classes will last approximately 75 minutes and follow this basic outline:

- A supine (lying) relaxation and gentle breathing exercise
- Supine stretches and twists
- Opening mantra (Om)
- Seated and kneeling releases
- Standing strength
- Standing balance and postural awareness
- Seated/supine final release or counter-pose
- Guided relaxation
- Final mantra

The intensity level will be low at first, increasing to moderate by the fourth class, depending on the progress of the group.

The reason for this is to establish a strong platform for your practice, grounded in an understanding of the importance of the breath and correct posture to avoid injury.

The mantra 'Om' may feel a little awkward to start with, and while its spiritual overtones make some students uncomfortable, there are physical and emotional benefits to the use of voice and sound vibration as part of your yoga practice.

In keeping with the tradition of yoga, there will be some use of Sanskrit names for postures during class, but the English translations will be mainly used.

The benefits of yoga

Regular yoga practice has a range of benefits, both physical and mental. It can improve your posture, muscle tone, flexibility and general range of movement. Yoga postures also stimulate the endocrine system, releasing hidden reserves of energy and feel-good hormones. Yoga improves circulation helping to flush toxins from the body, supporting the functioning of the major organs and immune system by removing waste products from the cells more quickly. As with most forms of exercise, yoga helps to support a healthy cardiovascular system and strengthen the skeletal and muscular structures, often providing relief from back pain and joint problems.

In addition, yoga helps us learn to manage the way we respond to stress and moderate the effects that ongoing stress has on our physical body. Combined with the effect yoga has on our hormonal system, yoga also helps us develop our powers of concentration and mindfulness, using aspects of breath, postures and visualisation students learn to calm the mind and direct the thoughts. As we develop these skills we can learn to extend them to other aspects of our life, both to manage negative stress and to improve focus and clarity for enhanced performance.

Challenges

It is important to remember that yoga is a non-competitive practice. Your own body should be your guide to how deep you go in to a pose and how long you hold it. Through regular practice you will certainly see changes and improvements, however, each of our bodies are built differently and for some people there are structural limitations for certain postures that no amount of practice will ever overcome.

It is common for students (especially women) who are not currently exercising regularly to experience some soreness in the wrists. This is mostly a matter of strength building through practice and will develop relatively quickly. Ankles are another common area of weakness where strength will build quite quickly with a sensible approach to your practice.

For many people the main challenge is hamstring tightness. It is important to listen to your body and work within your limits to avoid injury, while gaining the benefits of slowly lengthening and loosening this area.

The other common area of restriction is the hips. Yoga focuses quite extensively on hip opening and you will certainly feel benefits over time if this is your area of challenge, provided of course that you practice sensibly to avoid injury.

I will offer options for some of the more challenging postures. Ensure that you take the options that work for your body as you build up gradually to the full posture over the course of time.

You can also discuss any individual concerns with me prior to, or after the class.

After your class

If you aren't currently exercising you may experience some muscle soreness on the day after your first few classes. This is a positive sign! As long as it resolves itself after 3 or 4 days it is an indication that you are improving your muscle tone.

You can support the detoxing benefits of yoga with a good drink of water after class. This is particularly important in hot weather to maintain hydration. Even better in cool weather is a glass of hot water with a squeeze of lemon and a spoon of honey. This tonic acts as a blood purifier to clear the liver. Fresh lemon juice restores the pH level in the body, cleanses the system and provides important nutrients like Vitamin C, riboflavin and Vitamin B. The honey not only improves the taste, it has antibacterial and antioxidant properties and contains natural sugars which are easily digested to help restore energy.

One of the greatest benefits of yoga is relaxation. If you are able to avoid excessive stimulation after your class you should find that the quality of your sleep is improved.

Other Information

Over next 6 weeks we will focus primarily on asana and breath-work as the pathway to relaxation/meditation. However, because this is a 'course' I will also incorporate some elements of yoga philosophy. This is in no way intended to 'convert' anyone to a particular spiritual path. It is offered with the intention of enriching your experience and appreciation of yoga by providing some context for your practice.

Hari Om Tat Sat

