



# YIN YOGA

An antidote for modern living

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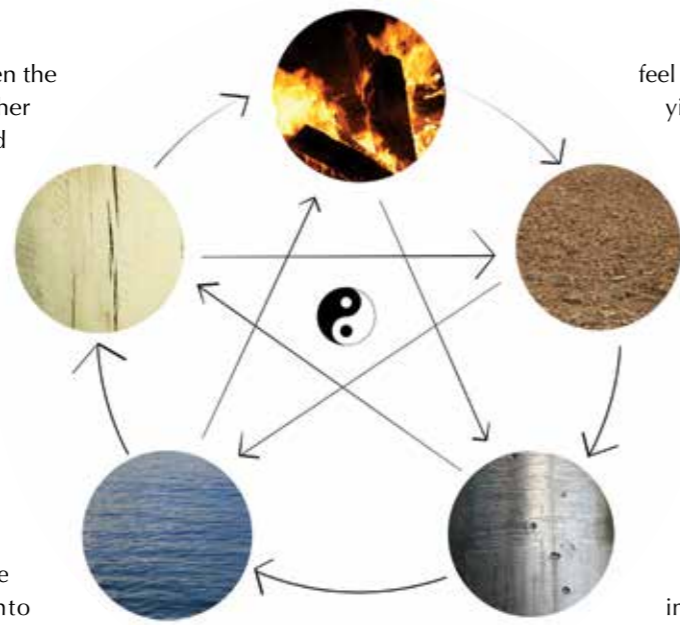
There is an old saying “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear”. As a dedicated and energetic yoga practitioner in my early 30s, I thought I had yoga – after all I had been practising hatha and ashtanga yoga for some years, had read *Autobiography of a Yogi*, knew the asanas in Sanskrit and felt invincible. That was until one day I attended a class that I had previously avoided because it looked slow, quiet, and well...easy.

During the class we were quietly instructed to move into various positions with the support of bolsters, blocks and blankets as the teacher encouraged us to come to our edge and remain still. From a series of poses called the ‘dragons’, I came face to face with such heat and agitation that my ego-identified ‘shanti self’ screamed, my mind ran wild like a hungry monkey and my hips cried out for mercy. My teacher appeared in the form of yin yoga and I humbly bowed to what I could learn.

## POWER OF OPPOSITES

As the world speeds up, it’s unsurprising that yin yoga has risen in popularity. Though not intended as a complete practice in itself, I believe it is essential to counterbalance modern life. The steady postures that define yin yoga were used thousands of years ago to assist with long periods of sitting in meditation and pranayama, and the modern conception of yin yoga was born in the 1970s, named “Taoist yoga” by martial arts expert Paulie Zink. A teacher of anatomy and yoga, Paul Grilley, studied with Zink and brought the practice into popularity along with Sarah Powers and my first teacher, Bernie Clark.

You may notice that ‘yin’ is not a Sanskrit term, and actually originates from China. If we consider the Taoist concepts of yin and yang – all things are said to exist and be defined as complementary opposites that cannot be conceived independent of each other. For example, we understand ‘hot’,



feel our body from the perspective of yin and yang.

On a purely physical level, the muscle, connective tissue and bone each have different elastic qualities and respond differently to the stresses placed upon them by yoga postures. The superficial and warm muscles of the body are more yang than the deep connective yin tissues of the body (tendons, fascia and ligaments) and the prolonged stretches in yin yoga apply moderate stress in order to increase the circulation in the joints and improve flexibility.

## EBB AND FLOW

‘big’, and ‘light’ in relation to their opposites ‘cold’, ‘small’, and ‘dark’.

According to Grilley, it is useful to consider the anatomy and essential movement of the human body in relation to the ancient concepts of yin and yang because they help to not only clarify how the tissues of the body work, but virtually every sphere of human thought and activity. Our yoga practice can reap great benefit and negate injury if we understand and

Yin yoga stimulates the connective tissue and keeps it healthy, focusing on the areas that encompass a joint, particularly the hips, sacrum and spine. It prevents the connective tissue from shortening, tightening, stiffening, and immobilising the joints. By generating electric currents, it helps strengthen the connective tissue and increase the lubrication, protection and pliancy of the joints within their natural range of motion. These actions increase



THE FIVE ELEMENTS/THINKSTOCK; STONES BALANCE/THINKSTOCK; ROY MCMAHON/CORBIS



our capacity to sit comfortably for longer, benefit our yang practices, and bring grace and ease to our movements.

Yin yoga is like acupuncture without needles because the practice strongly stimulates the connective tissue and the electromagnetic channels (meridians) that flow through them. According to the Five Element Theory of Chinese Medicine, the elements of wood, earth, fire, water and metal are all present within us, and yin yoga enhances the flow of chi for more harmonious and revitalised meridian activity. By assisting this flow, we remove stagnation and blockages in the body, nourishing and energising the vital organs and chakras that meridians flow through.

In contrast to muscular yoga practices and sports that favour repetitive, dynamic, rhythmic stretches and contractions that

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affect muscles and more superficial yang tissues of the body, yin yoga asks us to approach the body with the essence of surrender for several reasons. Firstly, if the muscles remain tense during our yin practice, then they take the strain and prevent the load on the deeper connective tissues meaning these areas remain unaffected. Secondly, Taoist thought suggests that when

we make a habit to describe things in terms of yin and yang, we learn to look past black and white answers and begin to see the interrelatedness of all things, even things seemingly opposite one another.

It is easier to avoid ourselves in our yang practices, however the practice of yin yoga insists students get intimate with themselves because the feelings and sensations that arise during a class are difficult to avoid and that is where the breakthrough happens. In the spirit of surrender we are able to create more space in the mind by witnessing the nature of our thoughts and releasing habits of resistance.

## COUNTER BALANCE

A more meditative approach to yoga, yin yoga aims at cultivating an awareness of inner silence that fosters an atmosphere





to witness our emotions without judgment so that we can learn to be present and let them flow. The practice guides us to our growth edges – that place where we experience discomfort in body and mind and make the choice to respond or react. Most of us react to challenging sensations and emotions with flight or resistance. However, if we cease succumbing to the restless, escapist mind we can be taught a profound life skill – to stay. A teaching beyond the mat, yin yoga guides us to live without imposing judgment on our physical restrictions, strong emotions and mind chatter and awaken to being accepting and receptive to all parts of our nature.

Often mistaken for restorative yoga, yin postures are largely passive and mostly done on the floor with some support, so that the muscles can relax and load can be applied to the deep connective tissues closer to the bone. While the postures may seem similar to those of a yang class, they are approached differently with names intended to alter the habit of approach, and shift the student's



mind from yang to yin, active to passive.

To get the most out of your practice, be mindful of the following principles of yin yoga:

- The body does not require warming up since this is not a muscular practice. The aim is to create a load between the connective tissue and bones.
- The asana are entered into slowly and respectively with minimal effort. When resistance is felt in the body (your 'edge'),

allow yourself to surrender to the pose and gravity.

- Become still in order to release the muscles and the mind.
- Stay three to five minutes or more in the posture.

In contrast to the busy and yang-centric world we live in that praises productivity, achievement and competition – but with very high individual and societal costs – yin teaches us to be still, present and listen.

Many find immediate benefits from yin yoga like a feeling of calmness, balance, open hips and a centred mind, which may take a few classes to appreciate its full rewards. Wonderful at all ages, yin yoga maintains the joint flexibility that naturally decreases as we age and is beneficial for those with anxiety, stress, sleep issues, migraines and TMJ. Other benefits include increased bone density, reduced tension, balanced energy flow, greater relaxation and a counter-balance to a busy lifestyle. Check out a class in your area and be inspired by two excellent books on the practice by Clark, *Yinsights* and *The Complete Guide to Yin Yoga*. 🌿

FELIX WIRTH/CORBIS; YIN AND YANG MANDALA SYMBOL/THINKSTOCK; TRANQUIL SCENE - BEACH/THINKSTOCK

