



Yin yoga: an act of kindness

Are you feeling stressed, exhausted and strung out? It's easy to ignore the gentle pull of yin in this frame of mind, yet this type of restorative yoga is often exactly what your mind, body and spirit are yearning for.

Words Jan Denecke Photography Gabrielle Fearn

Yin yoga is taking over. In the past decade, it has grown in popularity. This form of yoga focuses less on movement and more on slowing down through rest, stretch and introspection. With a fast-paced society, modern technology and social and financial pressures, yin yoga presents itself as the antidote. Could it be the medicine that brings you in touch with yourself and your nourishing nature through balance and kindness?

Nourishment: a balancing act

Balance is such a tricky word and you can spend your entire life trying to figure out its meaning. It is that state of equilibrium where you have an equal distribution of physical strength and ease, calm but focused attention as well as care for yourself and others. Your body, mind and emotions need different forms of nourishment to support balance, such as a wholesome meal, physical movement and rest. Nourishment can be activating, uplifting and energising like a sweaty power yoga class or gym session, a night out dancing, a rollercoaster ride at an amusement park or the excitement of a deadline. It can reflect, restore and rejuvenate you via a walk in nature, reading, classical music and meditation. These forms of nourishment help to push your boundaries as well as explore new and undiscovered grounds with patience, willpower, enthusiasm, clarity and focus.

Balance is key

Intuitively, you know what nourishes you and keeps you balanced. Life's circumstances, however, can naturally drift you away from your balance point. Ambitions such as work, finances and relationships can distract you; you might get caught up in

mental or emotional stresses; you might physically push and exhaust yourself; you might struggle to find a balance between work and leisure. Even though they might tip you over the edge and allow you to lose your balance, they are not wrong or disturbing. In fact, they offer insights into your growth process as a human. This is how you learn to excel and get to know yourself, step by step, a little bit better. Only sometimes it can be easy to forget that these challenges need reflection and nourishment to help you re-establish and redefine balance. If this does not happen, it is easy to get stressed, agitated and lost.

Retreat

We all have moments of feeling lost and disconnected from ourselves. In this frame of mind, it is easy to judge yourself or others, where the slightest bit of change or pressure leaves you tense, fatigued or agitated. If only you could take a break to ground and reset when this happens: drop whatever you're doing, take a holiday or go on a retreat. Yin yoga offers a regular retreat by learning to stretch your ability towards resilience, change and acceptance through kindness and balanced attention, without getting lost in your life's "stories" and circumstances.

Ener-chi

The intelligence of your body and its nourishment goes beyond the modern understanding that you have of it. For centuries, the Chinese have believed in a network of meridians. These meridians move through your body like rivers and nourish you with energy called *chi*. Nourishment through *chi* can be yang, which is masculine, powerful, active and strong, or yin, which is



feminine, nurturing and supportive. Yin and yang live together in harmony and support each other.

Twelve main meridians form six pairs where each pair consists of a yang meridian and a yin meridian. These pairs not only nourish and support specific organs, tissues and functions of your body but are also involved in your mental and emotional development and expression. Chinese medicine believes in supporting these meridians through acupuncture, herbal medicine and exercise. By stimulating specific areas of the body, it helps to improve balanced energy — or *chi* — flow in the body.

Stressing fascia

The scientific proof of meridians is poorly understood as these pathways are not physically visible in the body. However, research shows that specific meridian points are anatomically situated in fascia. Fascia is a soft tissue component of connective tissue that is threaded throughout your body. It is a matrix of uninterrupted fibres that give structural support as well as cover and penetrate

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organs, muscles, bones, blood vessels and nerve endings. It literally gives your body form and posture.

Healthy fascia provides both tensile strength and elasticity, but can easily tighten and weaken if it is not stimulated regularly. This can eventually affect your entire body and lead to injury. Stressing fascia through long, static stretches and gentle pressure actually activates and rejuvenates the healthy structure of fascia.

Longer resting holds of poses for between two and 10 minutes improves fluidity, grace and flexibility within your joints, ligaments and organs. As fascia is intrinsically connected to your nerves, organs, bones, blood vessels and muscles, it can affect your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. This proves the benefit of acupuncture and its related meridian points.



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East meets West in yin yoga

By focusing on stimulating meridians and fascia, you reach the deeper (yin) parts in your body. You stimulate these pathways of the body by actively challenging yourself in deep but supported stretches and gentle pressure. Physically, this promotes flexibility, releases tightness and improves the strength of your fascia.

By choosing poses that stimulate a stretch or pressure within specific meridians, your yin practice offers a deeper psychological layer to reflect on. Each meridian helps to investigate and strengthen your emotional and transpersonal awareness. It gives insights on how you may resist the natural flow of life by pushing yourself over the edge, refusing to accept changing circumstances or acting out when things don't turn out the way you expect them to. It balances you not by judging, overthinking or overanalysing but simply by observing, investigating and understanding what you feel and are going through. It is a daily dose of kindness and compassion that helps you ground and find your way back to balance.

How to approach your yin practice

Find an appropriate edge

When you go into a pose, the intention is to find an appropriate position that invites you with physical and emotional sensations. This, however, does not necessarily mean the stretch is relaxing or comfortable. There can be struggle or discomfort in the pose as long as it is not aggressive or painful.

Be kind; use props

It can be challenging to hold a pose while finding a sense of stillness, acceptance and reflection. Props such as blankets and bolsters can help you relax and focus on the target areas you are trying to stretch. This is best achieved if other parts of your body can relax and are not tensed up.

Challenge yourself by being calm and friendly

It is important not to overwhelm yourself by pushing yourself too deep into a stretch. Rather, find a stretch that gives you enough space to comfortably breathe and stay calm. First, try to go into a stretch that is 70–80 per cent of your maximum ability. You will be in a pose for about 3–5 minutes. This will give you enough space and time to go a bit deeper if you feel like it.

Just breathe

Your breath can be a stable and constant pillar of support whereby you learn to become more connected and at ease with present sensations. It is a meditative or mindful approach that helps you understand and accept each moment as it is: pleasant or unpleasant. At times, you can investigate if directing the breath to the area of the stretch might help you relax more in it.



Sukhasana

YIN YOGA SEQUENCE TO NOURISH YOUR LIVER AND SPLEEN CHI

These yin organs help to soften tension and increase kindness, concentration and reflection. They help to support healthy muscle contraction and relaxation as well as stimulate movement and stretch of your tendons and ligaments.

Together, the liver and spleen are important for the smooth distribution and nourishment of blood. The spleen extracts energy through the nutrients from food and makes it into chi, which is transported through the blood. Balanced chi within the spleen supports your concentration, helps to form ideas and helps you to develop reflection. The liver stores chi and supports the smooth flow of chi through blood as fuel for the body and mind. A balanced flow of chi in the liver gives you physical and emotional flexibility. It helps you adapt to change and supports compassion and clarity of judgement.

The liver and spleen meridians start in the big toe, move through the inner leg and groin, into the abdomen and chest

where they cross their related organ.

An imbalance of chi energy in the liver and spleen can affect your ability to be flexible and calm. It can lead to stressful behaviour with concentration problems, physical fatigue and tightness as well as judgemental and aggressive behaviour.

LIVER AND SPLEEN SEQUENCE

This sequence invites you to investigate and soften some of your rougher edges that lead you to acting out on yourself and others. Part of this sequence requires some physical action and strength — not to tire you out, but to observe if you can soften and be kind to yourself in somewhat more challenging poses.

Sukhasana

Sit upright with the right shin crossed in front of the left shin. Try to position the feet directly under the knees, with the shins parallel to the front of the mat. If sitting upright is difficult, place a folded-up blanket under your sitting bones. Close your eyes and bring your awareness to the breath.

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Twisted sukhasana

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Twisted sukhasana

Twist the body to the right without any force. Rest the right hand behind the body on the ground and the left hand outside the right knee. This pose stimulates a stretch in the abdomen, around the ribs and can even be experienced in the chest, armpits and inner thigh. Slow and deep breathing can stimulate both the liver and spleen as you expand and stretch the ribcage and abdomen. Stay for 2-3 minutes.



Sukhasana forward fold

Sukhasana forward fold

Rest the upper body forward and gently push the Earth away with your hands. This helps keep the sitting bones grounded and stimulates the stretch. Gentle pressure of the upper body on the hip flexor and a stretch in the inner thighs supports the liver and spleen meridian. Stay in this shape for 3-5 minutes.



Upright dragon

Upright dragon

Come into a lunge with your right foot forward and your left knee resting on the ground behind you. Try to keep the upper body upright by resting the hands or forearms on the right leg in front of the knee. This stimulates a stretch in the abdomen. Increase the stretch in the back leg, in particular the hip flexor, by sinking deeper with the hips to an appropriate depth. Stay for 2-3 minutes.

Metta meditation

The power of intention proves to be effective. Several studies show that metta meditation, the Buddhist meditation for loving-kindness, can increase empathy, compassion, social connection, self-worth and self-love. Metta meditation is a meditation of intention with the wish to develop happiness and kindness and to end all suffering. It can be directed to yourself, a loved one or the wider community. Using metta meditation during this yin sequence can strengthen the practice and its outcome. Connect consciously with the words and their deeper meaning. Simply repeat the following mantra, or make one up yourself. "May I (or you, or we) be at ease and free from suffering, may I (or you, or we) be truly happy."



Sleeping swan

Sleeping swan

From dragon, place your hands on the ground, slide or walk the right foot more to the left side of the mat and bring the shin and right knee to the floor. Lower the hips to the floor and keep the left leg reaching back. Place a block or blanket under your hip(s) for padding if the hips are floating off the ground. Keep the upper body upright for 1 minute for an extra stretch in the abdomen, hip flexors and inner thigh. Then lower the body down and rest. Stay for 3-5 minutes.



Half dragonfly side stretch

Half dragonfly side stretch

From sleeping swan, come up and extend the right leg out, bend the left knee and place the foot against the right inner thigh. Turn the upper body to the extended leg and place the right hand or arm on the inside of the leg; if needed, use a bolster or blanket to rest the arm on. Turn and open the upper body to the left. Let your head rest in the right hand. This pose stimulates a stretch in the inner thigh, groin and hip flexor of the bent leg and stretches the ribs on the left side of the body. For an extra stretch, extend the left arm overhead. Stay in the shape for 2-3 minutes. Afterwards, repeat this sequence on the other side and then rest your back body onto your mat in *savasana* for five minutes to complete your practice. ♀