

Yin Yoga

Every meditator knows the pain of stiff knees and an aching back. By stretching the connective tissue, Yin Yoga can condition you to sit longer—and more comfortably.

By Paul Grilley



Conventional yoga wisdom holds that nothing prepares your body for hours of seated meditation as well as regular asana practice. But when I began to explore more intensive meditation sessions, I discovered to my chagrin that years of sweaty vinyasa and mastery of fairly advanced poses hadn't made me immune to the creaky knees, sore back, and aching hips that can accompany long hours of sitting practice.

Fortunately, by the time I got serious about meditation, I'd already been introduced to the concepts of Taoist Yoga, which helped me understand my difficulties in sitting. I found that with some simple additions to my yoga practice, I could sit in meditation with ease, free from physical distractions. Taoist Yoga also helped me see that we can combine Western scientific thought with ancient Indian and Chinese energy maps of the body to gain deeper understanding of how and why yoga works.

The Tao of Yoga

Through deep meditation, the ancient spiritual adepts won insight into the energy system of the body. In India, yogis called this energy prana and its pathways nadis; in China, the Taoists called it qi (pronounced chee) and founded the science of acupuncture, which describes the flow of qi through pathways called meridians. The exercises of tai chi chuan and qi gong were developed to harmonize this qi flow; the Indian yogis developed their system of bodily postures to do the same.

Western medicine has been skeptical about the traditional energy maps of acupuncture, tai chi, and yoga, since no one had ever found physical evidence of nadis and meridians. But in recent years researchers, led by Dr. Hiroshi Motoyama in Japan and Dr. James Oschman in the United States, have explored the possibility that the connective tissue running throughout the body provides pathways for the energy flows described by the ancients.

Drawing on Motoyama's research, Taoist Yoga weds the insights gained by thousands of years of acupuncture practice to the wisdom of yoga. To understand this marriage—and to use it to help us sit with more ease in meditation—we must familiarize ourselves with the concepts of yin and yang. Opposing forces in taoist thought, the terms yin and yang can describe any phenomenon. Yin is the

stable, unmoving, hidden aspect of things; yang is the changing, moving, revealing aspect. Other yin-yang polarities include cold-hot, down-up, calm-excited.

Yin and yang are relative terms, not absolutes; any phenomenon can only be yin or yang by comparison with something else. We can't point to the moon and say, "The moon is yin." Compared to the sun, the moon is yin: It's cooler and less bright. But compared to the Earth (at least from our perspective), the moon is yang: brighter, higher, and more mobile. In addition to being relative, a yin-yang comparison of any two objects depends on the trait being compared. For example, when considering location, the heart is yin compared to the breastbone because the heart is more hidden. But when considering substance, the heart is yang compared to the breastbone because the heart is softer, more mobile, more elastic.

Analyzing various yoga techniques from the perspective of yin and yang, the most relevant aspect is the elasticity of the tissues involved. Yang tissues like muscles are more fluid-filled, soft, and elastic; yin tissues like connective tissue (ligaments, tendons, and fascia) and bones are dryer, harder, and stiffer. By extension, exercise that focuses on muscle tissue is yang; exercise that focuses on connective tissue is yin.

It's certainly true that whenever we move and bend our joints in yoga postures, both muscle and connective tissues are challenged. But from a Taoist perspective, much of the yoga now practiced in the West is yang practice—active practice that primarily focuses on movement and muscular contraction. Many yoga students like to warm up with asanas that infuse the muscles with blood, like standing poses, Sun Salutations, or inversions. This strategy makes sense for stretching and strengthening muscles; much like a sponge, the elasticity of a muscle varies dramatically with its fluid content. If a sponge is dry, it may not stretch at all without tearing, but if a sponge is wet, it can twist and stretch a great deal. Similarly, once the muscles fill with blood, they become much easier to stretch.

Yang yoga provides enormous benefits for physical and emotional health, especially for those living a sedentary modern lifestyle. Taoists would say yang practice removes qi stagnation as it cleanses and strengthens our bodies and our minds. But the practice of yang yoga, by itself, may not adequately prepare the body for a yin activity such as seated meditation. Seated meditation is a yin activity, not just because it is still but because it depends on the flexibility of the connective tissue.

The Joint Stretch

The idea of stretching connective tissue around the joints seems at odds with virtually all the rules of modern exercise. Whether we're lifting weights, skiing, or doing aerobics or yoga, we're taught that safety in movement primarily means to move so you don't strain your joints. And this is sage counsel. If you stretch connective tissue back and forth at the edge of its range of motion or if you suddenly apply a lot of force, sooner or later you will hurt yourself.

So why would Yin Yoga advocate stretching connective tissue? Because the principle of all exercise is to stress tissue so the body will respond by strengthening it. Moderately stressing the joints does not injure them any more than lifting a barbell injures muscles. Both forms of training can be done recklessly, but

neither one is innately wrong. We must remember that connective tissue is different from muscle and needs to be exercised differently. Instead of the rhythmic contraction and release that best stretches muscle, connective tissue responds best to a slow, steady load. If you gently stretch connective tissue by holding a yin pose for a long time, the body will respond by making them a little longer and stronger—which is exactly what you want.

Although connective tissue is found in every bone, muscle, and organ, it's most concentrated at the joints. In fact, if you don't use your full range of joint flexibility, the connective tissue will slowly shorten to the minimum length needed to accommodate your activities. If you try to flex your knees or arch your back after years of underuse, you'll discover that your joints have been "shrink-wrapped" by shortened connective tissue.

When most people are introduced to the ideas of Yin Yoga, they shudder at the thought of stretching connective tissue. That's no surprise: Most of us have been aware of our connective tissues only when we've sprained an ankle, strained our lower backs, or blown out a knee. But yin practice isn't a call to stretch all connective tissue or strain vulnerable joints. Yin Yoga, for example, would never stretch the knee side to side; it simply isn't designed to bend that way. Although yin work with the knee would seek full flexion and extension (bending and straightening), it would never aggressively stretch this extremely vulnerable joint. In general, a yin approach works to promote flexibility in areas often perceived as nonmalleable, especially the hips, pelvis, and lower spine.

Of course, you can overdo yin practice, just as you can overdo any exercise. Since yin practice is new to many yogis, the indications of overwork may also be unfamiliar. Because yin practice isn't muscularly strenuous, it seldom leads to sore muscles. If you've really pushed too far, a joint may feel sensitive or even mildly sprained. More subtle signals include muscular gripping or spasm or a sense of soreness or misalignment—in chiropractic terms, being out of adjustment—especially in your neck or sacroiliac joints. If a pose causes symptoms like these, stop practicing it for a while. Or, at the very least, back way out of your maximum stretch and focus on developing sensitivity to much more subtle cues. Proceed cautiously, only gradually extending the depth of poses and the length of time you spend in them.

The Yin Difference

There are two principles that differentiate yin practice from more yang approaches to yoga: holding poses for at least several minutes and stretching the connective tissue around a joint. To do the latter, the overlying muscles must be relaxed. If the muscles are tense, the connective tissue won't receive the proper stress. You can demonstrate this by gently pulling on your right middle finger, first with your right hand tensed and then with the hand relaxed. When the hand is relaxed, you will feel a stretch in the joint where the finger joins the palm; the connective tissue that knits the bones together is stretching. When the hand is tensed, there will be little or no movement across this joint, but you will feel the muscles straining against the pull.

It's not necessary—or even possible—for all the muscles to be relaxed when you're doing some Yin Yoga postures. In a seated forward bend, for example, you can gently pull with your arms to increase the stretch on the connective tissues of your spine. But in order for these connective tissues to be affected,

you must relax the muscles around the spine itself. Because Yin Yoga requires that the muscles be relaxed around the connective tissue you want to stretch, not all yoga poses can be done effectively—or safely—as yin poses.

Standing poses, arm balances, and inversions—poses that require muscular action to protect the structural integrity of the body—can't be done as yin poses. Also, although many yin poses are based on classic yoga asanas, the emphasis on releasing muscles rather than on contracting them means that the shape of poses and the techniques employed in them may be slightly different than you're accustomed to. To help my students keep these distinctions in mind, I usually refer to yin poses by different names than their more familiar yang cousins.

The One Seat

All seated meditation postures aim at one thing: holding the back upright without strain or slouching so that energy can run freely up and down the spine. The fundamental factor that affects this upright posture is the tilt of the sacrum and pelvis. When you sink back in a chair so that the lower spine rounds, the pelvis tilts back. When you "sit up straight," you are bringing the pelvis to a vertical alignment or a slight forward tilt. This alignment is what you want for seated meditation. The placement of the upper body takes care of itself if the pelvis is properly adjusted.

A basic yin practice to facilitate seated meditation should incorporate forward bends, hip openers, backbends, and twists. Forward bends include not just the basic two-legged seated forward bend but also poses that combine forward bending and hip opening, like Butterfly (a yin version of Baddha Konasana), Half Butterfly (a yin version of Janu Sirsasana), Half Frog Pose (a yin adaptation of Trianga Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana), Dragonfly (a yin version of Upavistha Konasana), and Snail (a yin version of Halasana). All of the forward bends stretch the ligaments along the back side of the spine and help decompress the lower spinal discs. The straight-legged forward bends stretch the fascia and muscles along the backs of the legs.

This is the pathway of the bladder meridians in Chinese medicine, which Motoyama has identified with the ida and pingala nadis so important in yogic anatomy. Snail Pose also stretches the whole back body but places more emphasis on the upper spine and neck. Poses like Butterfly, Half Butterfly, Half Frog, and Dragonfly stretch not only the back of the spine but also the groins and the fascia that crosses the ilio-sacral region. Shoelace Pose (a yin forward bend in the Gomukhasana leg position) and Square Pose (a yin forward bend in the Sukhasana leg position) stretch the tensor fasciae latae, the thick bands of connective tissue that run up the outer thighs, and Sleeping Swan (a yin forward-bending version of Eka Pada Rajakapotasana) stretches all the tissues that can interfere with the external thigh rotation you need for cross-legged sitting postures.

To balance these forward bends, use poses like Seal (a yin Bhujangasana), Dragon (a yin Runner's Lunge), and Saddle (a yin variation of Supta Vajrasana or Supta Virasana). Saddle Pose is the most effective way I know to realign the sacrum and lower spine, re-establishing the natural lumbar curve that gets lost through years of sitting in chairs. Seal also helps re-establish this curve. Dragon, a somewhat more yang pose, stretches the ilio-psoas muscles of the front hip and thigh and helps prepare

you to sit by establishing an easy forward tilt to the pelvis. Before Savasana (Corpse Pose), it's good to round out your practice with a Cross-Legged Reclining Spinal Twist, a yin version of Jathara Parivartanasana which stretches the ligaments and muscles of the hips and lower spine and provides an effective counterpose for both backbends and forward bends.

The Flow of Qi

Even if you only spend a few minutes a couple times a week practicing several of these poses, you'll be pleasantly surprised at how different you feel when you sit to meditate. But that improved ease may not be the only or even the most important benefit of Yin Yoga. If Hiroshi Motoyama and other researchers are right—if the network of connective tissue does correspond with the meridians of acupuncture and the nadis of yoga—strengthening and stretching connective tissue may be critical for your long-term health.

Chinese medical practitioners and yogis have insisted that blocks to the flow of vital energy throughout our body eventually manifest in physical problems that would seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with weak knees or a stiff back. Much research is still needed to explore the possibility that science can confirm the insights of yoga and Traditional Chinese Medicine. But if yoga postures really do help us reach down into the body and gently stimulate the flow of qi and prana through the connective tissue, Yin Yoga serves as a unique tool for helping you get the greatest possible benefit from yoga practice.

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