

## Viniyoga: Adapting Yoga to the Individual

Based on an interview from [www.YogaYoga.ca](http://www.YogaYoga.ca) with [Paul Harvey](#), founder of Viniyoga Britain,

Viniyoga is the science of individualizing yoga for each practitioner. Adapting yoga for specific needs can be approached in two ways: chronological and psychological. In the chronological model, there are three stages of life. The first is the stage of growth and expansion, in which the body is developed and asana is practiced. With very young people, their interest will be more engaged by using a range of challenging, jumping sequences. This stage ends at about 24 and then you move into family life.

When you have a family, who has time to practice asana three hours a day? During this second life stage, there is a developmental shift: you've got the asana under your belt, so to speak, and now the priority is to maintain your energy. Yoga is practised for protection and the need is more psychological than physiological. Your early training supports your physical health, and now it is time to maintain your psychological vitality, so pranayama is the primary practice, asana the secondary.

The third stage is what could be called a mid-life transition: priorities change again. The children are grown, you don't have the same ambitions in your work, it is no longer the outside, it is the inside that is of interest. The question is how to support that. In the first stage the priority is physiological, in the second stage it is psychological, and in this third stage the priority is spiritual. So in the third stage, asana and pranayama still have their place, but the focus is much more around the idea of meditation, inquiring into the question of death, coming to terms with it before dying.

### Yoga in the West

In the West, however, there is a problem with applying the chronological model, since most people coming to yoga are already in their middle years. They are not coming for growth; they are looking to yoga to repair breakdown. From the very start we have a disturbance such as stress or back pain, and we need support for our busy life styles. Yoga students in the West have two problems: the age at which they come to yoga and the reason why.

The question for us in this situation is, where to begin? This is where the psychological model may be helpful. This model holds that yoga needs to be taught according to the starting point of the person. There are three dimensions to this model: shikshana, rakshana, and chikitsa. If there are no obstacles, limitations or restrictions, whether the person is 14 or 24 or 34, the practice can be taught in the shikshana way. Shikshana means teaching the asanas in their most intense forms with all the nuances of bandhas, dristi and so forth. However, the person

must have enough energy. This is not a technique for boosting flagging energy, so it requires caution.

The second aspect of this model is rakshana, practising yoga for protection. We aim more at maintaining the health and strength that we have, rather than going to the extremes of the postures. We are careful not to make the practice itself another source of stress: we have physical limitations and limited time, and so the practice is adapted accordingly.

The third dimension, chikitsa, is used for individuals whose health account is well overdrawn, completely in the red. As we all know, if you are overdrawn, the first priority is to get rid of your overdraft.

With the psychological model, it is important that we find out which of these three dimensions is most important and relevant to a student. If somebody comes who has energy, money in the bank, then they can spend it, invest it, develop it. If someone comes who is not overdrawn but who has no extra money, then we want to make sure that they maintain what they have and do not become overdrawn in the future. If someone comes who is completely exhausted, energetically or in terms of health, the priority must be to fill up their tank.

[[Can end here. If so, add the following paragraph:

When working with a Viniyoga teacher, you can expect the teacher to conduct a thorough intake interview and to design a practice that meets your specific needs. He or she will then continue to support you in your growth as a yoga student and practitioner based on your specific needs.]]

However, in many cases, it seems that just the opposite is true, that the student must fit into the system. Allopathic medicine, for example, has become all about the map and not the traveller, so quite often you are perceived as a problem, not a person.

Any transformative process needs a map, but the map is not the journey. The teacher needs a system of possibilities, a map, but the needs of the student are paramount. I know that if I work with two people with the same problem, say sciatica, I might well prescribe two completely different practices for them because their intrinsic natures are very different. They could be a happy person with sciatica, or a depressed person, or a person who has encountered a lot of failure, or a person who has high or very low self-esteem. We need maps, but we must not become bound by them.

Yoga must adapt itself to the person and the person must also adapt to Yoga. If the student is not willing to give something up to make space for something new, make a change, then the practice is never going to work for them. The student needs to be prepared to practise, and the teacher needs the insight and the overall view to adapt the practice.

The question is, how do we choose, respecting all the hundreds of asanas and yet prioritising? People need to have a core practice; they need to be taught some core asanas. I know that for the majority of people, I use about thirty asanas and adapt and modify them for different needs. Someone with the health and the time could draw on perhaps another hundred asanas and develop them, but we need to be sure that those students are coming with a clear idea.

I have had students who want to learn difficult postures and their health is not strong enough. So what do you do? A student came to me who wanted to do very difficult postures but he was stressed: a busy job, a new baby, and he was trying to get up at 5:00 am to practise, and then asking me to teach him bandhas! So I agreed to teach him bandhas, but I first required him to be able to inhale for 10 counts and exhale for 20 counts, in nadi shodhanam for ten breaths, with no disturbance of the pulse.

As teachers we sometimes have to think of strategies to meet the desire of the student, to give them a piece of what they want and a piece of what they need. I knew that a long exhalation would relax that student, and that having to do 10 breaths would require him to be still for a certain amount of time, and that that would be good for him.

### The Spirit of Yoga

Some students come to yoga as a spiritual quest. I can't say that when I first came to yoga I had any focus on the mystery: it was more based around my desire to meditate and discovering that I couldn't sit, and so I began at a very practical starting point. I feel that the mystery aspect of Yoga is just coming to know more of who I am. I see the Yoga Sutras as the primary text for exploring this mystery, and there are four parts to this exploration.

First is knowing the mind; knowing that it has habits which are helpful and unhelpful and that there's a part of it which appears to be a mystery for me. Next is appreciating that I can refine the mind, work with it and influence it. Then, if I refine the mind with care and guidance, I can direct it and get it to work for me rather than against me. The fourth part is going beyond the mind.

### Distinguishing Yoga from Vedanta

From the Yoga perspective, it doesn't matter whether we say that God is beyond the mind or whether we say that there is a deep and quiet place within me. Yoga is very skilful, it doesn't say that we have to take God as that which is beyond the mind. This is where there is a distinction between Yoga and Vedanta. While Vedanta is concerned with the question of the nature of Brahman, Yoga is concerned with the nature of the mind and of myself. What is this mind that takes me to such wonderful places and yet also gets me into such hellholes?

Yoga is about how to know, and if you have a personal inclination about knowing God, that's fine. What does develop from our Yoga practice is a sense of

reverence, reverence for what's around us, our relationships, for what we eat, for different societies. We become more tolerant of different cultures and different attitudes.

### Viniyoga and Mystery

We can summarise this view of Yoga as taught by Krishnamacharya, the originator of the Viniyoga tradition, in three terms. Shakti krama is practising yoga in order to gain mastery over things, gaining power over the body through difficult postures and breathing techniques, and it is a very valid possibility.

The second term is adhyatmika, being more concerned with the mystery of life than its mastery. Adhyatmika means to go into the mystery of myself, inquiring who I am, why I am. The teachings of the Yoga Sutras are very important here. The third term is chikitsa krama. We all get sick from time to time, and therefore there is the need for yoga as medicine.

This is a practical way of looking at the possibilities that Yoga offers. First, Shakti Yoga is about gaining and developing power. But one must remember, that that which I am using to gain power, the mind itself, is getting more powerful. This can kick back on us, so then, second, we need some reflection on the mystery of life rather than its mastery. We need to come closer to the source of what life really is. And then finally, we cannot live without some form of medicine.

Paul Harvey is the leading teacher of Viniyoga in Britain. Along with Claude Marechal of Britain, he was a long-time student T.K.V. Desikachar and one of a handful of Senior Viniyoga (Yoga of Krishnamacharya) Teachers in the world.. His book, Yoga for Every Body, was released in 2001