

YOGA

for dancers

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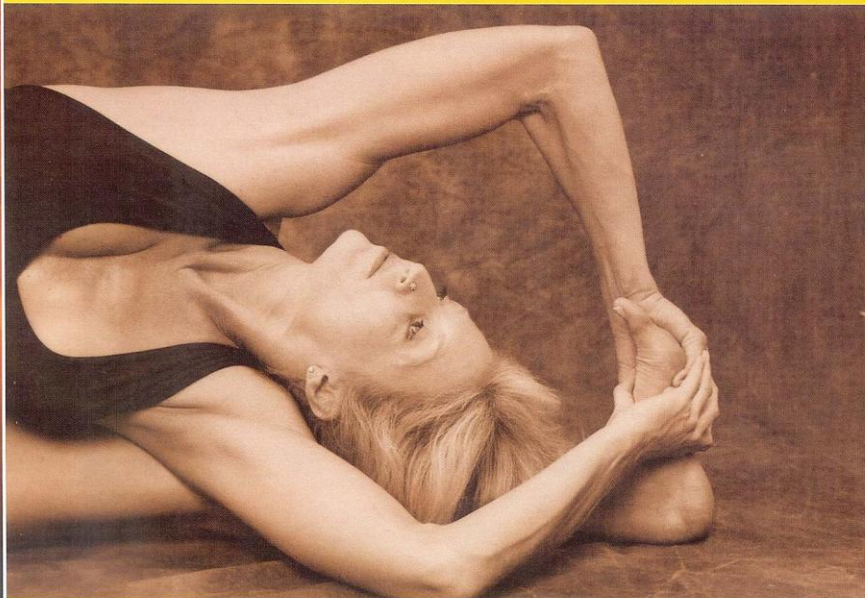


Photo courtesy of Infinite Yoga.

The purpose of yoga, as defined by the fourth century seer Patanjali, is to "still the fluctuations of the mind." In his treatise the *Yoga Sutras*, he considers Asana (postures) as only one of the eight components of yoga. The value of this physical training is to prepare the body and mind for the more esoteric and contemplative aspects of yoga, like meditation.

Yoga builds a discipline of exercise using structured techniques that have been around for over 4,000 years. Through movement, breathing and posture, the body is subjected to a comprehensive workout where every muscle and joint is engaged. This deepens body awareness, focuses the mind and broadens consciousness. During the process, the body is cleansed as thoughts are eradicated from the mind, trapped toxins are released from the body, and sweat flows — bringing balance to the body and clarity to the mind.

Spinal health, considered by the ancients (and backed-up by modern science) to be the key to health, vitality and longevity, is enhanced through twists, bends (forward and backward), stretches and core exercises. And, along the way, you build strength, stamina and a lean body. Clearly every dancer would benefit from such a practice — and a great deal do — but why not all?

Dancers are busy people. Lucky are the few who can dedicate themselves to dance full time. Most have to fit it around a hectic life involving work and other commitments. There has to be a compelling reason to add anything else to their agenda.

Dancers are demanding. If yoga deserves any of their precious time, it must bring real value. Dancers aren't looking for just exercise, they want to be stretched.

Dancers are flow and sequence junkies. They appreciate good choreography that makes sense and that is designed for intelligent bodies, not automatons.

Dancers expect quality. Dancers respect good teachers and expect quality-detailed instruction. They want to learn, understand more and be stretched mentally as well as physically.

Over the years, yoga has diversified into many different styles and practices. A few offer the kind of comprehensive package that checks all the boxes, but not all.

FINDING THE RIGHT STYLE OF YOGA

Iyengar — "Thinking man's yoga"

Dancer-friendly rating: 6/10

This style of yoga is very intellectual in approach and is wonderful for increasing body awareness. It is excellent if you are dealing with injury and want to learn how to isolate and strengthen a particular area. But, it is a fairly static form of yoga and lacks flow and dynamics that dancers love.

Bikram — "Hot Yoga"

Dancer-friendly rating: 3/10

This recent phenomenon is practiced to a rehearsed script in an artificially heated room to around 105 degrees. It is a wonderful workout, great exercise and makes yoga accessible to large numbers with little effort. However, it has a very fixed sequence, with no flow or dynamics, and you won't learn much. You are expected to "just do it," and they shout at you if you don't!

Ashtanga — "Power Yoga"
Dancer-friendly rating: 9/10

This traditional style of yoga consists of a progression of six challenging series that combine movement and breath with postures. Dynamic in its very nature, Ashtanga was popularized by Madonna and Sting and is widely practiced in the dance community.

Vinyasa — "Flow Yoga"
Dancer-friendly rating: 7/10

Derived from Ashtanga, this style of yoga maintains its dynamic nature, but sequencing is determined by the teacher. As a result, classes vary considerably and depend in large part on the instructor's choreographic skill.

Anusara — "Yoga Spirals"
Dancer-friendly rating: 7/10

The "new kid on the block." This style of yoga is another derivation with a Vinyasa flow. It is growing in popularity and is just beginning to become widely available.

Hatha, Kundalini, Sivananda, restorative, etc.

These styles each bring their values, but are more sedentary and introspective in nature. They are rarely popular with dancers.

FINDING THE RIGHT PLACE FOR YOGA

Unless you are lucky enough to work for a company that provides free yoga classes at your office, you will either have to go to a yoga studio or a sports club to take a class. Sports club yoga is designed to augment the fitness program in the center and is usually aimed at giving you a workout and/or a deep stretching routine. The most popular style is based on Vinyasa, which gives each teacher a degree of freedom while insisting that the yoga is sufficiently active and dynamic to keep the "jocks" happy. Often yoga in sports clubs is taught by fitness professionals who use the same skills they developed in the spinning classes, so you are lucky if you get an authentic yoga experience — but it does happen from time to time. Here, the enjoyment of the class depends a great deal upon the teacher and the attitude of the other students.

Although some yoga studios offer a range of yoga styles, most will tend to be focused on one principle style. This may limit your choice, but it will ensure that there is a consistency of teaching throughout the schedule. Yoga studios are usually more expensive than sports clubs (where yoga classes are part of the membership fee), but all of them offer packages where you can buy a series of classes for a lot less than a drop-in. If you are new to a studio, it is best to ask for advice about the most suitable classes — much better than just turning up and finding a class that is either too hard or too easy. Also ask about the teachers. Often the studio owner is the most senior and most experienced teacher — but that isn't always the case.

FINDING THE RIGHT CLASS

It is a big challenge to find a class that is sufficiently challenging, with a teacher who you can relate to and at a time that works with your schedule. Most studios and sports clubs have classes throughout the day. Typically, the early morning and lunchtime classes are designed to provide a not-too-challenging workout so you have enough energy to enjoy the rest of the day. The rest of the morning classes are often for stay-at-home parents, pre- and post-natal classes, and again are less likely to challenge. Those classes tend to be in the evenings starting from

around 5:30pm. A good class length is between 75 and 90 minutes, though some are a little longer. Anything approaching or exceeding two hours is questionable.

FINDING THE RIGHT TEACHER

This is the ultimate challenge. Traditionally, yoga is taught one on one between the teacher (guru in Sanskrit) and the student. Gu means dark and Ru means light. Ideally you want someone who can lead you from darkness to light — not a GuGu or a RuGu! As a dancer you demand crisp, clear, unambiguous instruction; natural and flowing sequencing with an underlying logic. The logic in yoga is undeniable, but its application — as demonstrated by its many styles — is boundless.

If you can, check out the teacher's bio. You should be able to find it on the Web site. First see who they have studied with. If they don't name their teachers and demonstrate a lineage of teaching, beware. Next see if they have any dance training or background. Not all dancers make great teachers, but it suggests that they may relate more closely to you. Once you are satisfied with that, check out a class and see for yourself.

Lastly, ask around. There are a great number of dancers who include yoga in their regime. Get recommendations from others and then spend some time on the mat. I'm sure you'll enjoy it! **DSD**

Dana Rae Paré RYT is the owner and creative force behind Infinite Yoga — an urban yoga sanctuary in the heart of Little Italy. Dana embodies the essence of Ashtanga yoga, creating a safe place and empowering students to release, let go and discover themselves. Local dancers who have studied with Dana include Rebecca Bryant, Leslie Seiters, Justin Morrison and Heather Stants.

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