

## Sequencing Principles for Energizing and Relaxing

Remarkably enough, changing the order in which you teach the same set of poses will completely change its effect on your students. Learning how to facilitate relaxation or energy during your classes begins with understanding these energetic effects.

By Jamie Lindsay

The order in which you sequence postures can have dramatic effects on the energy of your students. This article looks at some elementary energetic effects of yoga postures and ways sequencing can be used to help modify energy levels. This can be particularly helpful when working with students who suffer from either depression or stress and anxiety.

To understand sequencing, it is helpful to view postures as part of larger categories. For the purposes of this short article, we will use the categories most commonly employed in the Iyengar tradition: Standing Poses, Forward Bends, Backbends, Inversions, Arm Balances, and Twists. Of course, some of the poses fit into more than one category: Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand) is both an inversion and an arm balance; Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch Pose) is both a standing pose and a forward bend. Most postures, though, neatly fit into one category, with some aspects of the others: Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I Pose) is a standing pose, but in it the shoulder girdle and cervical spine contains elements of a backbend. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog)--a deservedly important posture in most yoga schools--is quite special in preparing the body beautifully for almost every type of pose; it contains elements of every grouping except twists.

The effects of these types of postures on the energy of the practitioner can also be categorized. There are finer and more detailed ways of understanding the energetic effects of yoga postures--David Frawley gives an Ayurvedic approach in *Yoga for Your Type*, for example, and the Viniyoga writings of T.K.V. Desikachar and Gary Kraftsow give another complementary scheme--but for our purposes, categorizing the poses as *stimulating*, *relaxing*, or *balancing* should be sufficient.

Poses that extend the spine--move it toward backbending--are generally *stimulating*, as are inversions, standing poses, and arm balances. Poses that flex the hips and perhaps flex the spine--moving towards forward bending--are generally *relaxing*. Twists are generally *balancing*. The energetic effects of those few poses that are truly only one sort of pose are therefore easy to understand: Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose) is a stimulating backbend; Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) is a relaxing forward bend.

Few poses are this easy to categorize. Of the vast assortment of yoga poses we can practice, most combine aspects of various types of poses. Particularly, it will become obvious that many poses that aren't truly forward bends actually contain elements of them. In the arm balances in

particular, there are few that are only arm balancing postures (Adho Mukha Vrksasana and Mayurasana [Peacock Pose] for example); most contain a strong element of forward bending. For example, Tittibhasana (Firefly Pose) and Bakasana (Crane Pose), which are similar to raised variations of Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose) and Malasana (Garland Pose) respectively, combine the *relaxing* effects of those poses with the *stimulating* effects of arm balancing.

In practice--and especially in teaching--this will come up most with the standing poses. Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose) and Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose) are examples of postures that are primarily standing poses. The latter has an element of forward bending in the standing leg, but it is still a *stimulating* pose. Virabhadrasana I adds an element of backbending to the standing posture, and so is even more *stimulating*, whereas Parsvottanasana adds a complete forward bend over one leg, which moderates the stimulating quality a bit, and Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) is a complete forward bend over both legs, which almost entirely balances out the *stimulating* quality of the standing pose, though certainly not bringing it fully to the *relaxing* effect of a seated forward bend like Paschimotthanasana.

Once you've assessed the subtleties of the particular postures you would like to teach and determined the energetic effects they have, you can begin to construct sequences that have either a *relaxing* or *stimulating* effect, and, with this understanding, see and feel how to create *balance*.

To have a generally *stimulating* effect on one's energy, design the practice sequence to start and finish with *stimulating* postures, with the relaxing *postures* in the middle of the sequence. The Ashtanga Vinyasa Primary Series uses this design, starting with Suryanamaskar (Sun Salutes), moving into standing poses, continuing with a combination of forward bends and twists, and ending with backbends and inversions. In that system, the stimulating function is even carried out in the sequencing of the inversions themselves! Placing Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand) before Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand) will be more stimulating than placing Sirsasana first, as is always done in the Iyengar tradition.

For an effect that is still, on the whole, stimulating--which would be called for particularly if one is attempting to address chronic low energy levels or depression, for example--there are many other ways to approach sequencing, using the general notes above about the effects of the types of poses. For example, practice could begin with inversions--Adho Mukha Vrksasana followed by Sarvangasana and then Sirsasana--and then move into arm balances mixed with the various twists, forward bends, and standing poses from which the arm balances are derived, finishing with backbends.

When dealing with anxiety or stress, however, the ideal sequencing would start with *stimulating* poses and move systematically towards the most complete forward bends, and would not tend to move back and forth among types of poses a great deal as that kind of variation is actually *stimulating*. Longer holds in the poses will also prove helpful, as movement can also be *stimulating*. A sequence could start with longer holds in *stimulating* standing poses like Virabhadrasana I-III, then move into twisting ones like Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (Revolved Side Angle Pose) and Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose), continue into Parsvottanasana and then Uttanasana before moving to the floor. For floorwork, start with twists--perhaps Marichyasana III (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Marichi, III), Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of

the Fishes Pose), and Bharadvajasana I (Bharadvaja's Twist)--followed by progressively deeper forward bends. For the deepest *relaxing* effect in practice, have your student prop her head (with bolsters or blocks) during the latter third of her practice in any forward bend where her head doesn't naturally reach her leg(s) or the floor.

In practice--and in teaching--in order to achieve *balance* it is important to pay attention to the overall content of the sequences you design and to make sure that they contain a sensible and balanced variety of postures, ideally not grouped and entirely separated as they are in the sequence ideas presented above. The options are limitless. Twists are themselves generally *balancing* postures, and so even a long practice of twisting will tend to have a *balancing* effect.

With these basics in mind and an understanding of your students' needs—which change day to day and month to month--you can begin to structure your classes around the experience you'd like to create.

**Jamie Lindsay has been teaching Hatha Yoga in various forms since 1996. He has studied with many senior Ashtanga teachers and spent two years in the Advanced Studies Program at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco. The writings of the Bihar School of Yoga and the techniques of Universal Yoga have been important influences on his studies, and his current teacher is Andrey Lappa.**