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Yo Joan



Dying to Understand

Yo Joan,

Years ago I learned TM. I have done it on and off for about 15 years, not very successfully until recently when I started meditating in corpse pose instead of seated.

Looking through many books, your "Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga" included, I cannot find any information on whether it is "good" or "right" to meditate in corpse pose. Or "bad." I certainly like it.

Any opinions?

Thanks,
Chris

Dear Chris,

What a wonderful question to start out the New Year. Thank you! The practice of yoga leads to meditation, so it is wonderful to have a question like this come up that helps us explore the ultimate purpose of the study of the yoga postures.

Meditation is most often taught with the spine erect. The main reason being that it is easier to maintain awareness when the spine is erect. It is easier to fall asleep when lying down and thus lose consciousness and go into a dream state rather than into a meditative state.

However, you mention that you have studied TM (Transcendental Meditation). This form of meditation uses mantra (repetition of sound) as a way of deepening consciousness. You say you have



been studying this for approximately 15 years. You also say that you have been finding success in your meditation practice when in corpse pose. I am not sure what this exactly means, but I assume you are feeling good about the direction your meditation practice is going while in corpse pose. Corpse pose is a state of relaxation where the body is lying flat on the floor with the palms resting upward. I encourage you to explore further what is happening to you in corpse pose that is making you feel good about your meditation practice. Here are some questions to help you:

- Are you remaining conscious in corpse pose?**
- Are you able to relax more in corpse pose than in seated pose?**
- What happens differently for you in corpse pose than in seated pose?**
- Why is meditation practice more effective for you in corpse pose?**

If your body is strong, as a regular yoga posture practice inspires, the relaxing qualities you find in corpse pose can be transferred into your seated practice. For example: As you are seated, relax your legs, relax your arms, relax your torso, and relax your face. Soften your breathing. Release your thoughts. Focus your mind on a mantra or object of devotion.

All the yoga poses lead to meditation, including corpse pose. It is wonderful that you are finding this process of meditation in corpse pose (savasana). Meditating while lying on one's back is difficult for many people. Most lose consciousness and are not able to maintain the awareness needed for meditation in this position. The next step for you, Chris, is to try and find this meditation when the spine is upright, and ultimately for your meditation practice to be a part of your regular movements in this world.

Wishing you, Chris, and all who are reading this (and even those who are not) a new year filled with deepening and expanding moments of peace.

**Namaste,
Joan**

Somebody, anybody, which body?

What are the benefits of yoga for the whole body?

Betty

Dear Betty,

It depends on what you mean by "the body?" In yoga, there are multiple bodies to consider. The

physical, the astral, and the causal. The physical aspects of nourishing the body and mind are what most of us see as the benefits of yoga practice. The physical body becomes suppler through regular posture practice and the mind becomes more relaxed and able to focus on the moment at hand. With a more supple body and mind, we are able to respond in a more efficient and appropriate manner to what is presented to us. We are also able to take action more effectively and make decisions more wisely.

The astral body (also called the mind sheath) is the energetic body. It is the vehicle of the spirit. It is nourished through breathing, meditation and concentration. It encompasses the physical body and also extends beyond it. It interprets your sensory input and is where you become aware of your emotions. It is not exactly your emotions, but rather 'your awareness' of your emotions.

The causal body is where it all comes together. It is where wisdom is stored. It is apart from your emotions. It is the essence of your existence, of my existence, of all that exists. It is the deep understanding of our interrelationship to this existence. Our physical bodies, our emotions, our thoughts are unique to us but the causal body is the part of us that is the same as the universe, like the depth of the ocean beneath the individual waves.

Yoga deepens the experience of all the bodies that make up who you are. Did you perhaps think there was only one body?

**Namaste,
Joan**

Erratic Breath ... Whew!

Dear Joan,

When doing breathing techniques in yoga, what should you do when your breathing starts to get erratic? How do you slow yourself down?

Annette

Dear Annette,

When your breathing becomes erratic it is a sign that you are overextending yourself. The first step would be to slow your physical movements down and or the pranayama (breathing) technique you are doing. Come back to your regular breathing by simply counting your breath. Inhale for 4 counts and exhale for 8 counts. This will calm your body and breath down.

There is no rush in the yoga practice. If your breathing becomes erratic, you have lost control. Pranayama is the practice of breath control. Consult your yoga teacher if a particular technique is

causing your breath to become erratic. Your teacher will be able to more specifically help you by guiding you into the correct practice of the technique or into a different technique so that breath control is not lost, but rather gained.

**Namaste,
Joan**

You are what you think

Dear Joan,

I am writing to you for some advice on a difficult situation that has been bothering me. I have been practicing yoga on and off for some time now and understand the philosophy and importance of Yoga in my life. One thing that I cannot seem to overcome is a situation with my family. Since my family's religious and cultural beliefs are based partly on Native American religion/esotericism, it is difficult to get them to see the yoga/eastern perspective in things. My family has been at odds recently with each other and I seem to be stuck in the middle as the peacemaker. It may sound unselfish to say, but I am beginning to grow tired of this position and would like to know how/what I can do to let them know where I stand in times of conflicts.

ing little arguments/nit-picks, etc., I just seem to keep my mouth shut and observe and let others take my cue to relax and just observe. I have two older sisters who seem to be infinitely arguing or talking to each other in a tone that is unfavored by me. The older of us is also having a tough time dealing with several issues such as managing two teenage sons, work, and I think anger issues. I hope this letter makes sense and you find that I would like your advice and help in finding how to incorporate the yoga philosophy into dealing with these issues. Thank you very much in advance for your help.

Respectfully,
R. H.
NM

Dear R.H.,

First, I would like to recommend a book called, "Yoga on War and Peace," by Pandit Rajmani Tiguenait Ph.D. It brings war to the Yogi's level of understanding, which is always a journey of self-discovery. I highly recommend it.

How to practice non-violence in a violent world - that is quite a dilemma. The struggles you refer to are not easy ones and I applaud you for looking deeply at these important family relationships and trying to transcend the karmic patterns. After all, we are all born on wheels of karma, some of us transcend wheel and some of us keep on spinning into the next lifetime where the speed limit keeps on

increasing. Our deepest lessons are within our family struggles, and they are the most difficult to transcend.

so easy to get sucked into negativity, and yet it is important to remember that we always have choices in our actions. In fact, those are the only choices we really have because everyone is on their own karmic path. This is similar to the heartache of many parents when they watch their children make mistakes even when they have warned them and tried their best to protect them. The only karma we really have any control over is our own. Certainly we may influence others, but it is ultimately their choice, just as your life is your choice. It is obvious you care deeply for your family and I hope you will take my suggestions in the kindest way.

You say that you do not favor the tones of your sisters. You say that you keep your mouth shut and let others take your cues to relax and just observe. I would say that they indeed are taking your cues. Your mouth may be closed but your mind is very open and the thoughts and judgments you are silently expressing are being read more clearly than you may think.

Many of us assume that the thoughts we hold in the privacy of our minds are just that - private. But, we must learn to understand that our thoughts transcend the physical. We are actually energy. All those around you are reading the thoughts you have at energetic levels. Transform your thoughts and you transform the world. Purify your thoughts and you purify the world. This is not easy to do. In fact, it is quite difficult. But, it is the ONLY way. Change has to happen from within. If it is impossible for you to observe in non-judgement, then pack your bags and leave. Here is the key though - leave in kindness. Come back when you are able to participate non-violently. You are the one in the drivers seat. Everyone else is simply along for the ride.

Change YOUR thoughts, R.H. You can do it. You can do it well.

**Namaste,
Joan**

**Do you have a question for Joan?
Send your questions or mail to [Joan](#) .**

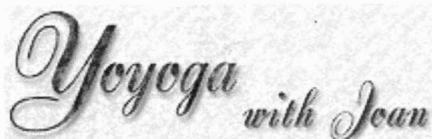
Please include the city and state you are from.

If your letter is directed for Suburban LIFE newspaper column, please state so in letter.

Joan respectfully gives each letter received her individual and kind attention.

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Yo Joan



Meditating Monks

Dear Joan,
I fall asleep when I meditate. What am I doing wrong?

Sincerely,
Sue

Dear Sue,

You aren't necessarily doing anything wrong. Why do you think the legs are crossed on top of the thighs in the meditation pose of Lotus? It anchors the body down and keeps the meditating monks from falling over when they fall asleep! Many people get sleepy when they attempt to meditate. It's important to honor the body. Perhaps if you get drowsy, your body is clearly stating to you that you need more sleep?



Remember this easy slogan: 'Feeling down, move around. Feeling great meditate.' The time to meditate is when you are feeling great and rested. This will give you the chance to fully experience what meditation is or can be. When you meditate, have a candle or an object of beauty to use as your central focus. Many people use a picture of a form of divinity that is meaningful to them. The important point to remember is - meditation occurs when you merge with your object of meditation. This is why it's important to have something beautiful you want to merge with.

I wish you well, plenty of rest and sweet dreams so that your meditation practice can be especially meaningful for you.

Namaste,
Joan

Awesome Ashrams

Dear Joan,

I would like to do a long-term (1-2 yrs.) volunteer/"Peace Corps" type project, in any region and any field that involves a yoga lifestyle. Do you know of any such organizations? Any information you can give me would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you so much,
Nancy

Dear Nancy,

Have you ever considered a Yoga Ashram? Many Ashrams offer programs where people can practice Karma Yoga. This is the Yoga of selfless service. You work at the Ashram and also partake of the yoga lifestyle while there. There is no payment for your services, but you do get free room and board. You also will be able to partake of daily asana (yoga posture) classes, vegetarian cooking, meditation classes etc. It will give you a very clear picture of a yoga lifestyle.

Ashrams are located all around the United States and around the world. There are the Sivananda Ashrams with numerous locations all around the globe. Another is the Satchidananda Ashram in Buckingham, Virginia. There are also other types of Yoga Institutes, which offer similar type programs of self-study. The Himalayan Institute in Honesdale Pennsylvania is one, yet another is the Kripalu Center in Lenox Massachusetts. All of these organizations have websites, which offer more information than I can supply in this column. I have been to several Sivananda Ashrams and have been to the Kripalu Center. I highly recommend each one. My next stop will be The Yogaville Ashram and then the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale. I have found living in a yoga community, even if briefly, to be very inspiring.

Namaste,
Joan

It's back again!

Dear Joan,

I have tried a few times to attend yoga classes, but find that many poses seem to aggravate my back problems. I've had a week back most of my life, but trying to strengthen my core muscles seems to result in straining my back. A friend suggested that I find a class or a video with instruction on how to

modify the poses for people with back problems. Do you know of such a video, or such a class in the west-suburban area? Denise LA GRANGE

Dear Denise,

Garden of Yoga is located right near you in LaGrange. You can contact them at 708-989-1329. Yes, all of the yoga poses can be modified to help your back problem or any other physical concern. The poses are meant to open, flex and extend your spine, not strain it. A qualified yoga instructor can be helpful in helping you adjust your poses. It would also be wise of you to find a class that is small enough so that the instructor can address your concerns adequately. I have found in my experiences as an instructor that larger classes are more difficult to teach for this very reason. Ideally, yoga is taught on a one to one basis, teacher to student. This allows for the individual attention of the special needs of the student.

There are so many yoga books out there now to explore, as well as videos and DVDs. Find one that interests you by simply browsing the Internet or bookstores. I would stay away from vinyasa or ashtanga styled teachings if you have a back problem. These are classes that involve swift flowing movements and often quite challenging transitions from posture to posture. If you are not prepared, you might hurt your back in the process of flowing from one posture to the next. Instead, find a yoga class or DVD that explores the postures slowly, gently, and with great attention to detail. Interview the instructor ahead of time, if possible, before coming to the class to see how large their classes are and how they structure them. This may save you some time in finding the right fit for your back.

Namaste,
Joan

And, low back again!

Dear Joan,

I read your book couple of years ago and loved it. I began practicing yoga since then on and off. I have a question to ask you; sometimes after practice I start having low back pains, especially if the practice included the sun salutations or cobra pose. Can you tell me if this is normal?

Thanks a lot,
Ana

Dear Ana

It's a common occurrence for many people, Ana, but its not the effect one should be receiving from doing yoga poses. Yoga poses increase the strength and flexibility of the spine. If done correctly, there is no pain. Since you are experiencing pain, the way you are doing the poses have

to be reevaluated. The first person to ask is your yoga teacher. Your teacher can watch your movements and tell you when something is not right. From what you describe to me, I would say that you are not engaging the back of your legs when you go into cobra pose. If you do not engage the back of your legs you put too much pressure on your lower spine. This overextends your spine. Check your arms too. In cobra pose, the arms are slightly bent and elbows are kept near the body. Extend yourself only to the point where you can still feel some movement in the pose. Do not extend yourself to your extreme limit. Yoga develops grace and confidence. Out of balance comes grace.

Continue on, Ana, slowly, steadily and with respect for your profound body. Listen to it when it says it hurts. Take a step back, re-access, and lead it forward in kindness.

Namaste,
Joan

Meditation Moods

Dear Joan,

I feel a lot of anger over all that is going on overseas. I have tried meditating to help bring some peace into my aggravations, but it does not work. Any suggestions?

Steve

Dear Steve,

Meditation doesn't necessarily supply a quick fix to our emotions. In fact, sometimes meditation can bring repressed emotions to the surface. For in order for us to find balance, we have to clearly see what we have to balance in the first place. Sometimes people try meditation to run away from their feelings or their anxieties. A candle, soft music or mantra can calm the soul and bring us into quieter contemplations. As great and necessary as these quieting, stress-reducing practices can be, they are not necessarily long lasting. Shift from a quiet room of candles to a blasting room of noise and neon lights and you may quickly see how short lived your comfort levels are. Meditation involves a deep inner cleansing that helps us deal more effectively with these inevitable changes in our shifting environment.

I suggest you give meditation another chance. When you sit to meditate and aggravations come to your attention, watch them as if you are an observer watching your feelings. Instead of thinking, "I am angry," watch the anger pass through you. For, you are not angry. Anger is yet one more emotion that shifts through your every changing consciousness. Watch it as it travels through instead of thinking that it IS you. Notice how many other emotions pass through you as you sit there. When you see another, say, "Aha! I am not this, I am not that." When you see it float by, let it go and come back to observing your breath until the next aggravation comes around the corner of your mind. Wave at it as it passes by, and then come back to simply watching your breath.

Meditation is not complicated, but it is life changing. It is freeing to realize that as close as you may feel to your emotions, they do not define you. You are so much more beautiful and powerful than anything your emotions can limit you to. Meditation comes about through intimately observing one simple breath at a time.

**Namaste,
Joan**

Relax the mind

Dear Joan,

I bought your book 'The Complete Idiot's Guide To Yoga 4th Edition' Let me tell you I fell in love with this book and Yoga. I just started to get very mild anxiety about 3 months ago. It's not severe but it sometimes gives me a busy mind. I was wondering if practicing Hatha Yoga will relax my mind and make me feel more relaxed. Hope you have a great new year!

CaMi

Dear CaMi,

The more you practice, the more you will see the benefits of the practice. Hatha Yoga will help you focus your mind, and help you feel more at peace with your body. Happy New Year back at ya!

**Namaste,
Joan**

To tattoo or not to tattoo? That is the question.

Dear Joan,

Is getting a tattoo anti-yoga? What about dark natured tattoos?

Adam

Dear Adam,

As far as I know, there is nothing stated in the ancient yoga texts referring to tattoos. Many see tattoos as artwork on the body. Your body is the temple that houses your spirit. Much care should be taken on the tattoo chosen, as it will be on your body forever. A tattoo of a dark nature will be there as a regular reminder of the dark aspects of what you see. Yoga is a process of unveiling the many layers of illusions of who we think we are. Ultimately, you and I - all of us - are of a divine nature. Perhaps you may see the dark side now, but with regular practice of yoga your divine nature will become more apparent. As your divine nature becomes clearer, you will relate more to the inspirations of lightness rather than darkness. This is not to deny that darkness exists. As a great yogi Paramahansa Yogananda said, "Creation is light and shadow both, else no picture is possible." Yet, it is a matter of what images we want to utilize as guides in our lives. This is your decision. It is certainly a decision well worth meditating on.

**Namaste,
Joan**

Teacher Research

Dear Joan,

I have been practicing yoga for a number of years. Lately I have felt the draw to teach in my area. What resources are available to research multiple week long retreats that are geared towards potential teachers? And what are the qualifications that most experienced teachers have?

DMC

Dear DMC

I do know there are some organizations that are trying to establish national credentials among teacher training retreats. I am not involved in these political processes, but do know they exist and welcome you to explore them further in your research. As far as qualifications for most experienced teachers, they vary greatly. My view is that it is not a school that makes someone a great teacher; it is the teacher's discipline of practice and this teacher's ability to relate this discipline to a student. Some of the greatest yogis I have known have not gone to any school nor do they hold any certificates of knowledge. Keep your heart open. Do not be over impressed by certificates of training. Let your heart lead you. If a teacher helps you to open your heart, hold this teacher dear.

**Namaste,
Joan**

Partisan Yogis

Dear Joan,

I've been reading the 1999 edition of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga* and am really enjoying it. Though I've done hatha yoga and meditative yoga for more than 20 years, there is always something more to learn. Now my question (and it is a serious question), This country, and maybe the world, is very politically polarized. I am very aware of this, more than any other time, when I go to my yoga meditation group and they talk about liberal political figures as being the saviors of the world. I see things very differently and while I don't make an issue of my conservative views, they aren't a secret either. One night during a meditation workshop, a high level teacher (a man teaching at a well known Chicago area university) made the comment that "You can hate George Bush, but you don't have to be attached to that hatred." The second time he said it, I walked. Does hatred of anybody belong in this type of discussion? My question is, 'why do I have to feel that as a political conservative, I'm some kind of untouchable in these sorts of groups?' Aren't conservatives God, too? - Even those of us who like George Bush? Isn't he God, too? I think that people doing yoga, of all people on the earth, should be tolerant of the views of others.

Betty

Dear Betty,

What an excellent question to end this issue of Yo Joan and begin our new year. There is no denying what a politically charged world we live in. Our country is at war, and the feelings around the politics of this war are often strong, passionate, and partisan. Any war, any extreme action, can bring on extreme responses - this is natural, but this kind of response does not necessarily create balance. Balance (sattva) is created out of discipline and thoughtful purpose.

I agree that hatred does not belong in yoga studies, but its experience cannot be denied either. To push a feeling or emotion under the rug does not relinquish it. An emotion must be faced head on and relinquished. I think this may have been what your teacher was trying to express. If one has hatred, acknowledge it, and then let it go. Do not be attached to it because this feeling, as with any feeling, is transient and does not define who one is. You are much greater than any feeling state. It is this type of understanding that may help us from going into future wars, and may also help us in creating current peace in our turbulent world. Instead of immediately responding to violence of any sort with "an eye for an eye" mentality and blinding ourselves in the process, it would benefit us to step back and see that we are more than an emotional response. It requires deep inner exploration to respond to violence in peace. Something few of us are willing to put the time into, yet something that can change the world if even a few of us do.

Namaste,
Joan

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Please include the city and state you are from.

If your letter is directed for Suburban LIFE newspaper column, please state so in letter.

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