

**Mark Stephens**

*Author of Teaching Yoga and Yoga Sequencing*



# Yoga Adjustments

PHILOSOPHY, PRINCIPLES, AND TECHNIQUES

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Foreword by Shiva Rea

## Praise for *Yoga Adjustments*

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“As someone who is regularly called upon to treat yoga students injured by ill-informed teachers, I can confidently say that Mark Stephens has done our community a wonderful service with his newest work, *Yoga Adjustments*. Along with *Teaching Yoga* and *Yoga Sequencing*, this book forms a trilogy of essential works for every yoga teacher who strives to be more sensitive, safe, and effective in their teaching.”

—LESLIE KAMINOFF founder of The Breathing Project, NYC, and coauthor of *Yoga Anatomy*

“Whether you’re in training to be a teacher, just starting your teaching career, or a veteran with many years of experience, Mark Stephens’ *Yoga Adjustments* will prove to be an invaluable resource. As with all his work, this book is written with intelligence, insight, and integrity.”

—RICHARD ROSEN director of teacher training at Piedmont Yoga and author of *Original Yoga*

“I’m very excited about Mark Stephens’ new book, which offers an invaluable service to the yoga community—teachers, aspiring teachers, and yoga students. As yoga’s popularity grows, we need our yoga teachers to mature as well, and Mark has given them a superb guidebook for making smart, safe, clear asana adjustments that further our understanding and deepen our experience of yoga. In this way, the benefits of Mark’s expertise extend beyond the yoga community by demonstrating how healthy environments can be created in which anybody can practice yoga with confidence.”

—CYNDI LEE founder of NYC’s Om Yoga and author of *May I Be Happy* and *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind*

“Another monumental and much-needed work to guide yoga teachers in making safe and effective hands-on adjustments with their students. Once again Mark Stephens raises the bar and accelerates the evolutionary path of modern yoga. This book is an invaluable reference for today’s and future teachers.”

—GANGA WHITE founder and codirector of The White Lotus Foundation and author of *Yoga Beyond Belief*

“This book is an important contribution to the ongoing evolution of yoga teaching and practice. Hands-on adjustments provide a quick and amazing two-way communication stream between teacher and student. Used with or without verbal cues, they can bypass most abstract theory and induce good alignment to reveal how a pose might feel when balanced, open, flowing, and free. Conversely, adjustments can be mechanical and even manipulative, seductive, and harmful. Because of this powerful potential in both ways, we all need to look intelligently at their mechanics, purposes, and ethics. Stephens’ *Yoga Adjustments* is a wonderfully detailed resource for our investigation.”

—RICHARD FREEMAN director of The Yoga Workshop and author of *The Mirror of Yoga*

“Just as a good massage feels great and is healing, and a bad massage can be annoying, even painful and unpleasant, so it goes with hands-on assists in yoga. May this book encourage healing touch! Thank you, Mark, for making this information so accessible and clear!”

—**ERICH SCHIFFMANN** founder of Freedom Style Yoga and author of *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving Into Stillness*

“I love that Mark Stephens has covered not just the biomechanics of hands-on assists and the spectrum from technical support to subtle energetic direction, but also the internal dynamics and ethics that the power of touch brings up in people of all walks of life. Mark offers practical insights, including the many dimensions of respecting a person’s process, injuries and tweaks, and the important boundaries that are necessary for entering this territory that often like being a ‘midwife of the embodied experience.’ Mark brings understanding to the somatic power of touch and the role of hands-on assists in the unfolding of yoga. This is a book that will surely be serving teachers for a long time.”

—**SHIVA REA**, founder of Prana Flow®–Energetic Vinyasa and author of *Tending the Heart Fire*

“We generally think of touch as from one person to another. In this book, Stephens reminds us that we must first be ‘in touch’ with ourselves and with our own yoga practice before adjusting another person’s pose. Overall, the book focuses on practical application of adjustments, based on fundamental elements of an ethical personal practice. On asana, Stephens states that the teacher should understand ‘their benefits, risks, contraindications, preparatory asanas, alignment principals, energetic actions, common challenges, modifications, use of props.’ Quite thorough, the step-by-step examples are threaded throughout with groundwork in both Western and yoga philosophy. It is a pleasure to read.”

—**LISA WALFORD** curriculum director of Yoga Works Teacher Training and senior certified Iyengar Yoga teacher

“Finally, the book I have been waiting for—a clear and thorough guide to hands-on assisting in yoga. Mark Stephens takes us from the guiding principles of touch observation of students and establishing intention for touching, through to specific verbal cues and hands-on instruction to support those cues. For teachers, he offers stances to safely ground ourselves while adjusting a student along with terminology for clarifying the various ways of touching for maximum effectiveness. Additionally, Mark provides clear guidance on how *not* to touch. All of this culminates in a comprehensive index of poses with verbal cues and clear photographs explaining the various options for hands-on assistance to provide great alignment in the asanas. Never before have we teachers and students had such a concise guide available to us.”

—**MARION MUGS MCCONNELL** founder of South Okanagan Yoga Academy, British Columbia

“A must-read for any yoga teacher looking to expand and deepen not only their knowledge of adjustments, but also of teaching asana as well. The level of detail and knowledge presented here is phenomenal.”



## **Also by Mark Stephens**

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*Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques*  
*Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformative Yoga Classes*

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# Yoga


## Adjustments

PHILOSOPHY, PRINCIPLES, AND TECHNIQUES

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**MARK STEPHENS**

Foreword by Shiva Rea

 North Atlantic Books  
Berkeley, California

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*To everyone on the path of sustainable and transformational yoga.*

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# FOREWORD by Shiva Rea

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*It is the last evening Vinyasa class at Yoga Works in 1994. In a sea of rhythmic flow and deepening meditation, everybody from all walks of life, shapes, sizes, and levels of experience moves together. In between these whole-body mudras—standing postures that change into backbends, twists, forward bends—there is the guiding intelligence of hands-on assists that follow the flow of breath. The language of touch—the somatic knowing that formed our first way of experiencing the world—gives visceral direction to my guidance by words: “Ground your thighs into the earth.” “Lengthen the spine from the base.” “Move your shoulder blades into your body.” “Reach through the crown of the head.” “Feel your heart expand into the space.”*

Our hands teach the foundation of asana and assist the flow of yoga, reflecting a knowledge and wisdom that applies to life. Where are you coming from? Where are you evolving to? How do you move in a way that is connected to your center? Hands-on assists reveal potential that is waiting to be embodied. And like life, hands-on assists are sometimes firm and at other times light and subtle, taking us across the places we fear and delivering us into the places we call home.

Back in the day, Mark Stephens was an amazing assistant to my evening classes where there was a palpable magic to the evolving synthesis of the Vinyasa Flow form that I am proud to say twenty-two years later I was instrumental in helping to pioneer and evolve. In these late-night classes, where the mental swirl of urban life surrendered more easily into the nonverbal state of flow, I remember the energy of the room where I would be on one end of the room and Mark on the other, and we would look up and behold the satisfaction of people going deeper in their own embodiment and the quiet power that hands-on assists offers to that process.

I was grateful to be able to share with Mark and the students what had been passed on to me by my teachers at the time—Sri Pattabhi Jois, Chuck Miller, and Erich Schiffmann, who were amazing teachers of the art of transformative assists. The process of giving an “assist” can range from a daily educational grounding and support to the profoundly life-changing. I could see back then in my classes that Mark was absorbing this knowledge, and it is a celebration to be able to offer the foreword to his evolution in this compendium for all teachers on the art of hands-on assisting.

Mark’s previous life in academia, as a director of alternative education and as a yoga studio owner, has given him the fortitude, scope, and honest approach to this knowledge, which deserves to be honored for its true complexity and clarity. I love that he has covered not just the biomechanics of hands-on assists and the spectrum from technical support to subtle energetic direction but also the internal dynamics and ethics that the power of touch brings up in people of all walks of life. Mark offers practical dynamics that include the many dimensions of respecting a person’s process, injuries, and tweaks as well as the important boundaries that are necessary for entering this territory that is often like being a “midwife”

the embodied experience.” Mark brings understanding to the somatic power of touch and the role of hands-on assists in the unfolding of yoga.

Like Mark’s previous book on sequencing, he is making accessible the many layers of the knowledge from across different schools of yoga, which is a real accomplishment. I especially appreciate how he continues to underline the importance of really knowing the dynamics of an asana in your own body—its key actions, *vinyasa krama* (stages of practice), and contraindications—before giving effective assists.

Thank you, Mark, for your time and effort in providing this service for yoga teachers everywhere. As I am writing this in the midst of finishing my first book, I can appreciate the tremendous dedication it takes to transfer living knowledge into the written form. I feel that your writing has the same qualities that I first recognized in you back in those evening classes. You show up for life fully and are willing to do your own work and open to the full process of yoga in your own evolution. Congratulations for completing this offering to the yoga world—a book that will surely be serving teachers for a long time.

May all beings who embark upon this journey open to the power of embodiment through yoga and the gift within our hands for awareness, healing, support, and integration.

*Sarva Mangalam*—Auspiciousness for all.

—Shiva Rea

Founder of Prana Flow® Energetic Vinyasa

# PREFACE

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This book is for anyone on the yoga teaching path who is committed to teaching classes that are safe, sustainable, and transformational. With over 100,000 yoga teachers in North America alone and new yoga teacher-training programs opening nearly every day, the ranks of the yoga teaching profession are growing proportionately more quickly than the increase in students taking yoga classes. While one might be tempted to see this as a boon to students looking for the right teacher, there is legitimate concern over the core competencies of teachers who themselves might be beginning yoga students or otherwise limited in yoga experience or knowledge. Long gone are the days when most teachers studied and apprenticed for many years or even decades under the guidance of a highly experienced mentor, and the mentoring days may be limited for those veteran mentor teachers who are not keeping pace with the many advancements and refinements in the techniques and methods of teaching yoga, especially amid concerted efforts to elevate yoga teaching to a bona fide and widely respected profession marked by high standards of training and competence.

When writing my first book for yoga teachers, *Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques*, my focus was on offering a broad text covering all of the main elements of teaching yoga, including yoga history and philosophy, subtle energy and the highlights of functional anatomy, general techniques and methods for teaching asana classes, how to teach various *pranayama* and meditation techniques, and the basics of sequencing and working with specialized needs among students. Meanwhile, as I peered more closely at how teachers were designing their classes and listened to teachers discussing their greatest challenges, I was inspired to write *Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformative Yoga Classes*. That second book for teachers addresses a simple question at the heart of teaching sensible yoga classes: *why this then that?* It presents the philosophy, principles, and techniques for designing yoga classes, looks closely at how to sequence one's instructional cues, offers sixty-seven model sequences for a wide variety of student needs and intensions, and practical resources for sensibly designing one's own unique yoga classes.

Just as that second book was going to press, the bombshell of William J. Broad's provocative article on "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body" appeared in the *New York Times*. Like many others in the yoga community, my reaction to Broad's statements was as swift as it was visceral; it felt like he was hitting the yoga community below the belt, and I, like many others, passionately responded in writing. I also reached out to Broad directly to try to better understand his concerns and his sources. He sent me a massive database on yoga-related injuries compiled through the National Consumer Product Safety Commission's National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS). Although I find some of that data contains ecological fallacies or other issues of integrity, Broad's basic message—that doing yoga can wreck your body—is well supported by it.<sup>1</sup> Looking more closely at that data, at Broad's



subsequent book, *The Science of Yoga*, and many similar articles published in the popular press over the past twenty years, but also listening to the stories of innumerable teachers confused by even very basic student conditions, the need for the present book became abundantly clear.<sup>2</sup>

This book is all about the nuances of teaching asanas and making them as accessible and sustainable as can be for the real human beings doing them in our classes. In teaching asanas we rely primarily on three means of conveying guidance to our students: visual demonstration, verbal cues, and tactile cues. To the extent that you as the teacher are clear in understanding what you are attempting to communicate to the student, any of these three methods can effectively lead a student to adjust and refine what he or she is doing in a way that makes that student's practice more safe, sustainable, and transformational. This is the primary mantra of this book: *safe, sustainable, transformational*. Here we look at the balance and appropriate use of these means of guidance, giving close attention to how they are uniquely interrelated in guiding any particular asana.

Our purpose as yoga teachers is to guide and inspire students in their personal practice ultimately to a place where the student can continue practicing through his or her life guided by the best teacher they will ever have—the one inside. This involves a relationship between teacher and student that is open, clear, and respectful. Our role as teachers is not to give forceful adjustments that somehow correct postural forms, nor to assist students in going far beyond what they are capable of on their own. We are at best informed and inspiring guides, ideally informed by knowledge of the terrain, the conditions and intentions of our students, and perhaps something greater that inspires you to fully devote yourself to sharing the practice in meaningful ways.

In my own evolution and learning along the yoga path, I've been very lucky to have had so many diversely insightful teachers whose depth of personal commitment to the practice and to the art and science of transmitting it to others was not only contagious but was a primary source of the foundational knowledge presented here. My first yoga teacher, Erich Schiffman, taught me how to relate hands-on adjustments to the principles of alignment and energetic actions in the asanas. Chuck Miller taught me how to give assistance amid the flowing sequences of Ashtanga Vinyasa. Jasmine Lieb, with whom I apprenticed for six months, shared with me her keen insights into teaching beginning-level students as well as those with a variety of physical challenges—insights she received from training with Indra Devi, through her practice, and through her physical therapy background. After crossing paths with Shiv Rea in Ashtanga Vinyasa classes, Iyengar workshops, and in her own pioneering Vinyasa Flow classes in the early 1990s, I assisted her in classes, workshops, and on retreats in which she revealed some of the powerfully inspirational ways that a teacher can share the practice in syncopation with the rhythms and seasons of life. Many others have influenced me through workshops in further developing the skills and insights that I have synthesized, expanded, refined, and presented here: Kofi Busia, Tim Miller, Lisa Walford, Dona Holleman, Rodney Yee, Judith Lasater, Ramanand Patel, Richard Freeman, Patricia Walden, participants in my hands-on adjustments workshops over the past fifteen years, and amazing students who have always been my most insightful teachers. I am grateful to all.

In crafting this book, I once again had the joy of working with the folks at North Atlantic Books, many of whom are very much on the yoga path or kindred spirits in exploring

consciousness and becoming. Doug Reil encouraged me to devote myself to this project when at times I considered other ideas, offering several suggestions that helped me craft the book as it is. My project editor, Leslie Larson, guided the entire process of moving from manuscript to a published book. Christopher Church once again made my writing clearer and helped bring greater coherence to the manuscript. Suzanne Albertson's cover and inside book design beautifully speaks for itself.

Several friends, colleagues, and fellow teachers provided invaluable comments on various drafts of my original manuscript: Anne Tharpe, Daniel Stewart, Darren Main, Elise Oliphant, Ganga White, Joanna Bechuza, Karen Dunn, Max Tarjan, Megan Burke, Melinda Bukey, Richard Rosen, Sean Lang, Sarah Finney, and Todd Tuholke.

Several of my students and teacher-training graduates patiently modeled for the asana photographs: Amy Hsiung, Andreas Kahl, Anne Tharpe, Erika Abrahamian, Jennifer Lun, Marcia Charland, Max Tarjan (cover), Michelle Naklowycz, Nadia Lewis (cover), Pat Taylor, Ray Charland, Samantha Rae Boozer, Sean Lang, Shannon McQuaide, and Tom Simpkins. James Wvinner shot all the asana and hands-on adjustments photos.

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# Part I

## Foundations



# Philosophy and Sensibility in Giving Yoga Adjustments

PART OF THE SUBLIME NATURE OF YOGA IS THAT there are infinite possibilities for deepening and refining one's practice. In playing the edges of effort and ease, exploring balance between surrender and control, and opening to self-understanding and self-transformation, there is no end to how far one can go along the path of awakening to clearer awareness, more integrated well-being, and greater happiness. There are also seemingly infinite styles and approaches to yoga, even different ideas about what yoga is, offering a rich array of practices that any of the seven billion of us sharing this planet might at any given time find most in keeping with whatever brings us to explore this ancient ritual for living in the most healthy and awakened way. It's a fascinating, challenging, often mysterious path that ultimately reveals the deeper beauty inherent in each of us as we gradually come to discover the balances that most complement and support our diverse values and intentions in life. If along the path one becomes a teacher—a guide on the yoga path—then the practice itself blossoms even more as practicing and guiding each bring light to the other.

In doing yoga, the best teacher one will ever have is alive and well inside. In every breath, every posture, and all the moments and transitions in between, the inner teacher is offering guidance. The tone, texture, and tempo of the breath blend with myriad sensations arising in the bodymind to suggest how and where one might best go with focused awareness and action.<sup>1</sup> There is no universally correct method or technique, no set of rules, no single goal, and no absolute authority beyond what comes to the practitioner through the heart and soles of simply being in it, listening inside, and opening to the possibilities of amazing qualities of being fully, consciously alive. It's a personal practice, even if one comes to it and finds in it a more abiding sense of social connection or spiritual being.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is inestimable value and purpose in having outer teachers and in teaching yoga. While with consistent and refined practice students develop the awareness that makes the asanas more understandable, accessible, and sustainable from the inside out, gradually and more clearly feeling their way into sequences that work, nearly all of us benefit from the informed insights of a trained and experienced teacher whose guidance, even just on matters of postural alignment and energetic actions, can make our experience in doing yoga safer and more beneficial. A teacher can also give guidance on techniques and qualities of breathing, mental attentiveness, postural modifications and variations, sequences within and between asana families, as well as adaptations to address special conditions such as frailty, tightness, hypermobility, pregnancy, and interrelated physical, physiological, and psychological pathologies. Put differently, teachers matter; the question is, how do we best teach?

As yoga teachers, we employ a variety of techniques to support and guide our students including through the spirited or charismatic ways we generally hold the space of a class, the use of physical demonstration, verbal cues, even metaphor and stories to add inspiration and insight. Each of these aspects of teaching involves tapping into all of our inner resources along with ongoing learning and practice. With time and consistent presence on the path of the teacher, these qualities become more integrated into our evolving repertoire of knowledge and skills that enable us as teachers to guide student practices in a way that makes sense for the actual students in our immediate presence—this in contrast to teaching in a cookie-cutter fashion as if everyone were the same and the same exact practice made sense for all of humanity.

There is no end to how much we can learn and evolve as teachers. True to the maxim posited by the Greek philosopher Aristotle that “the more you know, the more you know you don’t know,”<sup>3</sup> the further you go in your training, learning, and experience as a yoga teacher the more you’ll realize that there’s an infinite universe of knowledge and wisdom to bring to the practice. This becomes more abundantly clear as we come to better appreciate and understand our students, which is absolutely essential if we are to guide them well in the practice. To get a better sense of this, let’s look at the practice itself and the basic elements and sensibilities of teaching.

### **Unique Students, Unique Teaching**

We all come to the practice of yoga uniquely. While we are all human beings, that’s where the uniformity ends, because we’re a beautifully diverse species with different genetic endowments, life experiences, lifestyles, conditions, and intentions. Consider for a moment these examples of differences:

- A thirty-five-year-old mother of two with a background in dance and surgically repaired anterior cruciate ligaments who sits for long hours working as a financial analyst.
- A twenty-three-year-old pregnant astrophysics graduate student in peak athletic condition and with bipolar disorder.
- A fifty-four-year-old Buddhist nun with a thirty-year consistent yoga practice and advanced osteoporosis.
- A twenty-year-old college student with a pronounced right thoracic scoliosis.
- A sixty-one-year-old recently retired software engineer with years of weight training and extremely tight muscles who is recovering from breast cancer.
- A forty-one-year-old beginning yoga teacher free of injuries who proudly enjoys showing off his gymnastic ability in the front of class.

Welcome to the reality of teaching yoga. If you intend to teach public yoga classes

where it's anyone's guess who might show up, you should anticipate having a diverse array of students, student conditions, and student intentions in your classes: serious students for whom yoga practice is essential to daily life in healing traumas and purely athletic weekend warriors; spiritual seekers and people of strong religious faith as well as those for whom faith is seen as intellectual weakness; every age, every interest, every philosophical perspective, and every condition.

Given the vast differences among students, it's important to give guidance that addresses unique conditions while teaching in a way that makes sense for the entire class. (Ideally students go to classes that are appropriate for them; just don't count on it, but do count on diversity.) So before getting even close to matters of hands-on guidance and adjustments (as well as other means of providing guidance), there are other qualities to emphasize in helping to ensure that students practice in keeping with the realities of their lives.

## The Heart of Practicing and Guiding Yoga

At the risk of stating the obvious, in practicing yoga we all start from where we are—this contrast to where someone else might think we are or where we ourselves might mistakenly think we are. Many teachers have preconceived or ill-informed ideas about the abilities or interests of their students while many students over- or underestimate their immediate present ability. How as teachers might we best navigate these realities? By guiding our students to cultivate a personal practice that reflects their own values, intentions, and conditions, even as these all may (and likely will) evolve.



Doing yoga is a personal practice, not a competitive sport.

There are several basic elements that are ideally communicated to our students in every practice and given even greater clarity with newer students.<sup>4</sup> Among the most important

the idea that yoga is neither a comparative nor a competitive practice, despite some people doing their best to make it so.<sup>5</sup> Exploring with this basic sensibility, the practice will be more safe, sustainable, and transformational. It's a sensibility—a basic yogic value—that reflects the sole comment on asana found in the oft-cited Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: *sthira, sukham asanam*—meaning steadiness, ease, and presence of mind (the latter, from the root word *as* meaning “to take one seat,” which I interpret to mean to be here now, fully attuned to one's immediate experience). It's helpful to relate to these as qualities we're always cultivating in the practice. Do note that Patanjali is not describing anything even closely approximating the sort of postural practices that began evolving several hundred years later and eventually became Hatha yoga, which has evolved more in the past seventy-five years than in the previous thousand.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, we find the sensibilities of classical yoga brought forward in the earliest verified writing on Hatha practice, the mid-fourteenth-century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, where Swami Swatmarama tells the yogi to have “enthusiasm, perseverance, discrimination, unshakable faith, courage” to “bring success to yoga” and “get steadiness of body and mind.” Later, Swatmarama (1985, 54, 67, 132) mentions “being free of fatigue while practicing asana,” suggesting the balance of steadiness and ease earlier emphasized by Patanjali.

Exploring this, let's say for a moment that we're starting a practice standing at the front of the mat (bearing in mind here that the same concepts, qualities, and sensibilities are ideally cultivated regardless of one's initial postural position—sitting, lying supine, and so on). The standing posture might be called Tadasana (Mountain Pose). In it, we're opening to being steady, at ease, and present as can be—imagine a mountain!—and thereby more naturally opening to a deepening sense of balance and equanimity that is well expressed with another Sanskrit term: *samasthihi* (literally, “equal standing”). For some students, this simple position is somewhat challenging, especially if held for several minutes or if a student has a condition such as general postural misalignment, advanced pregnancy, multiple sclerosis, leg length discrepancy, or basic weakness. With practice, it's likely to become easier to find and sustain a sense of *samasthihi* in this position, especially with proper alignment and energetic action. If all one did was to continue standing and moving into deeper equanimity (or sitting or lying supine), this might become more of a meditation practice. But here we are primarily on the path of asana, the postural practices that are best explored with conscious breathing and presence of mind (the reciprocal effects of which we will discuss below as further essential aspects of asana practice).<sup>7</sup>

As we come to the experience in an asana in which we no longer feel any significant effort or effort in being in it, we might simply stay there, being in it, or we might find ourselves opening to a variation of it or transitioning to an asana in which we find it takes some great effort to find stability and ease to be just as stable, relaxed, and present. However, if we always practice asanas in a way that involves no effort—that is one path—we might be missing an opportunity to engender deeper awakening and change through the intensity and diversity of experience that doing yoga offers us, to really do Hatha yoga, which is most deeply and lastingly done with the self-discipline (*tapas*) it takes to fully show up to the best of our ability, breath by breath, asana by asana, practice by practice, day by day, exploring the edges of possibility and discovering what happens amid it all. With persevering practice—*abhyasa*—we do stay with it; fully committed to the practice, we proceed with deep

experience and reflection, opening to and learning from the intensity of the experience each breath of the way.

This involves staying close to the edges of possibility in what we're doing in our practice. I take an approach Joel Kramer, a pioneering innovator of contemporary yoga who significantly influenced the evolution of the practice in the 1960s and 1970s, beautifully and richly describes. As we begin moving into an asana, we come to a place where we feel something starting to happen, what Kramer (1977) calls "the primary edge" (I call it the "aha moment").<sup>8</sup> Going further, we come to another "edge" where the bodymind expresses pain or discomfort, or simply blocks further range of motion (I call it the "uh-uh moment"). In persevering practice, we "play the edge" by staying beyond the "aha" but well enough with the "uh-uh" to have the space to slowly and patiently explore small refining intentional movements. Breath by breath, the edges tend to move—we open more space and create more sustainable ease, thus more easily moving awakening energy throughout the bodymind. Staying right up against the final edge of possibility or if moving too quickly, there is no space or time for this sense-based refinement and awakening; instead we're likely to cause injury, reinforce unhealthy habits, or simply burn out on the practice.

As much as fully showing up in the practice and playing the edges of possibility and refinement are essential in doing yoga, there's another essential quality of the practice, what Patanjali gives as *vairagya*—nonattachment. In the practice of nonattachment we open to being in the practice with a sense that anything is possible, with spontaneity yet still with self-disciplined effort, all the while identifying more with the deeper intention in our heart—perhaps health, contentment, happiness—than with the performance of a pose or attainment of some static or predetermined goal. *Abhyasa* and *vairagya* are thus integrally interrelated elements of a safe, sustainable, and transformational yoga practice that allow us to progress from one place to another with steadiness and ease. Together they give us one of the most basic yogic principles: *it's not about how far you go, but how you go.*

Cueing students in the asanas with a balanced attitude of *vairagya* and *abhyasa* helps ensure that they feel supported in their practice while feeling free of attainment-related expectation. By conveying this attitude through every aspect of one's teaching, including offering and giving tactile cues, students more naturally find their way to their inner teacher, utilizing the intensity of physical sensation and the barometer of the breath to guide their effort in their personal practice.

Indeed, an essential element of this balanced approach to sustainable and transformational yoga practice rests in the breath. Curiously, although the classical writings on Hatha yoga give primary emphasis to pranayama (from *pra*, "to bring forth," *an*, "to breathe," and a combination of *ayama*, "to expand," and *yama*, "to control"), pranayama practice—based on yogic breathing—is typically given little attention in many contemporary yoga classes.<sup>9</sup> Along with asana practice, with pranayama it's important to develop the practice gradually and with steadiness and ease.<sup>10</sup> However, soft, gentle, subtle *ujjayi*—"uplifting"—pranayama can be safely practiced by all, including complete beginners, pregnant women, and those with blood pressure issues, infirmities, and other pathological conditions. The breath itself nourishes our cells and our entire being. The light sound of *ujjayi* helps us keep our awareness in the breath in a way that makes it easier to cultivate the smooth, balanced, steady flow of each and every inhalation and exhalation, providing immediate feedback on our movement in



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