

Article by Gabriella Giubilaro

Heating and Cooling Āsanas

(those that stimulate and those that relax)

“The philosophy of yoga has a very systematic approach that leads one from the mundane to the spiritual life. It is a journey from the body to the soul, from the annamayakośa to ānandamayakośa. While systematizing the yogic philosophy in the form of aphorisms or sūtras, Patañjali did so in a sequential order. Progression or ascending one-self from the worldly life to the spiritual life, of the yogic process, is also sequential. Sequence is very important. The process of bringing change or transformation in the practitioner, whether physical, physiological, moral mental or spiritual is also sequential.”(Basic Guidelines for Teachers of Yoga. B.K.S Iyengar & Geeta S. Iyengar. page 29)

For practitioners of yoga and for teachers it is important to understand how to develop an āsana sequence. In some systems of yoga only one sequence is followed, or they might have fixed sequences. In the practice of Iyengar Yoga, on the other hand, the sequences may change, and the way in which an āsana is practiced may change.

Therefore, it is important to understand the logic of a sequence and not to mix āsanas randomly, which might have negative effects not only on the body, but also on the mind and the nervous system.

Some āsanas are heating (stimulating or invigorating) , like Sālamba Śīrṣāsana, while others are cooling (calming or relaxing), such as Sālamba Sarvāṅgāsana.

When one says that an āsana is cooling, it means that it has a calming or relaxing effect on the nervous system and on the mind; when it is

heating, that it has an invigorating or stimulating effect on the nervous system and on the mind.

For a beginner it is difficult to distinguish between the two effects for different reasons. The main reason is the lack of sensitivity, which one develops over time with practice, with careful attention to the execution of the āsanas.

Another reason is the difficulty to do the āsanas when the body is rigid and hard. In this case all the āsanas are difficult and the effort required to execute them creates heat, which makes the āsanas seem to be heating.

For example, for a beginner who practices Sālamba Sarvāṅgāsana, the muscular effort is such that heat is created, which masks the relaxing effect of the same posture. So, when there is much effort, a relaxing pose might become a stimulating one, or a heating one. The relaxing effect is there, but it is masked, or hidden, by the effort.

Obviously a young and strong person has different limits from someone who is not young any longer or who is weak, so the condition of the practitioner is fundamental in understanding whether a posture is too tiring or not.

Furthermore, certain āsanas can have a different effect on the body and mind, depending on how they are executed. Therefore, not only is the order of the sequence important, but also the way in which āsanas are practiced.

Often practitioners confuse the effect on the body versus the effect on the mind. A simple action like stretching the legs or the arms, might require some effort, but it still has a relaxing effect on the mind (for example when Adho Mukha Śvānāsana is practiced with the head

resting on a bolster, or when Setu Bandha Sarvāngāsana is practiced with support under the pelvis).

Heating āsanās are:

Abdominal postures - Udara Ākuñchana Sthiti

Standing postures - Utthiṣṭha Sthiti

Back bending postures - Pūrva Prathana Sthiti

Sūrya Namaskār

Śīrṣāsana and variations

Cooling āsanās are:

Forward bends - Paśchima Prathana Sthiti

Supine āsanās, with or without support - Viśrānta Kāraka Sthiti

Twists - Parivṛtta Sthiti

Seated āsanās - Upaviṣṭha Sthiti

Adho Mukha Śvānāsana

Sālamba Sarvāngāsana and variations

Viparīta Karanī and Setu Bandha Sarvāngāsana, with or without support

Śavāsana

It is advisable that a practice starts with stimulating poses, followed by the calming ones. One should not mix these two categories of poses. After a challenging and heating practice, it is always essential to dedicate enough time to the cooling poses, in order to calm the mind.

The practice is like a journey up to the mountain. First of all there are the preparations, then the journey up the mountain, the climb, arriving at the summit and finally the descent and the return home. Just as one does not face a difficult climb without preparing oneself adequately, one needs to train consistently to be able to do a challenging yoga practice. In yoga, consistency and a daily practice is more important than the occasional difficult practice.

It is also important to observe oneself at the end of the practice, as one needs to develop the sensitivity to perceive the effect that the practice has on the body. One also needs to develop the ability to perceive the effect the practice has on the nervous system and on the mind. If one is agitated and irritated with the whole world after a practice, then the practice was not a well-balanced one. If, on the other hand, one feels at ease with oneself and with the world, then the practice has created an internal peacefulness. I repeat, it is important not to confuse physical tiredness with the effect on the nervous system and the mind.

One starts with easy postures, like Adho Mukha Vīrāsana, followed by Adho Mukha Śvānāsana, Tāḍāsana, always respecting the limits of the practitioner. Then, gradually, one moves from simple āsanās to more complex āsanās, which requires more effort. Finally, one makes time for the balance of energy by practicing restorative or more relaxing poses, suited to the class program, before ending with Śavāsana. It is also necessary to prepare for Salamba Śīrṣāsana with a few poses where the head is inverted, such as Uttānāsana, Prasārita Pādottānāsana, or Adho Mukha Śvānāsana.

To “build a sequence of āsanās” we must first decide what the scope will be of the sequence, which “mountain to climb”. For example, I could develop a sequence to practice twists, inversions, or forward bends; or I could decide to create a sequence for lower back pain, or to recover after a long journey or a tiring day.

It is important to choose a suitable sequence for the various stages of a woman’s life; menstruation, pregnancy, perimenopause and menopause. Geeta Iyengar’s books *Yoga, A Gem for Women* and *Iyengar Yoga for Motherhood* provide invaluable teachings for all these circumstances. For athletes there are also particular āsanās that could help, depending on the specific sport.

This is the scope of Guruji's last book, *Yoga For Sports*, posthumously published.

It is always important to keep in mind that a sequence for beginners, or for those who are inexperienced, is different from one for experienced/long term practitioners. For beginners the practice might begin with standing poses, which tone the body and awaken the mind, then Śīrṣāsana can be done (if it has been introduced) to rest the legs, then it can be followed by forward bends, twists and finally Sarvāṅgāsana and Setu Bandha Sarvāṅgāsana. For this sequence the standing poses could be Utthita Trikoṇāsana, Utthita Pārśvakoṇāsana and Pārśvottānāsana, all poses that help with the forward extensions.

An example of another sequence; start with standing poses, then Śīrṣāsana (if it has been introduced) to rest the legs, then followed by some backbends (with or without support), then twists and finally Halāsana, Sarvāṅgāsana and Setu Bandha Sarvāṅgāsana. For this sequence the standing poses could be Utthita Pārśvakoṇāsana, Vīrabhadrāsana I and Vīrabhadrāsana III, as they help with backbends.

For a more experienced practitioner more time could be given to standing poses, or they could be held for longer, or one could concentrate more on backbends, or on forward bends: it is always good to conclude with some twists, which help balance the spine, and then finally give time for restorative poses.

For a more seasoned practitioner it would be better to practice prāṇāyāma first, then a more active āsana practice later in the morning and in the afternoon Sālamba Śīrṣāsana with variations or Sālamba Sarvāṅgāsana with variations could be practiced. It is important to dedicate enough time to restorative āsanās; practice Viparīta Karanī and Setu Bandha Sarvāṅgāsana with or without support. Guruji said that certain āsanās have a more profound effect on the brain than

Śavāsana itself. This means that when the mind is irritated it is not enough to go directly into Śavāsana. There are āsanās like Viparīta Karanī at the wall, with support, where the āsana itself helps to relax the brain cells, thus calming the mind. For this reason, it is always better to prepare oneself at the end of a practice to help with the relaxation not only of the body, but also of the mind.

Article written by Gabriella Giubilaro. 11/05/2023

<https://www.istitutoiyengaryogafirenze.it/>



Gabriella Giubilaro is widely known for her dynamic teaching of Iyengar Yoga, her good humor, her attention to individual needs and clarity of her presentation. She believes in communicating the essence of the Yoga postures through simple, but meaningful explanations that help her students discover the intelligence of their own bodies, challenging the students so that they can experience their maximum potential. Gabriella began her Yoga practice in 1973 in Florence, Italy. After receiving her Doctorate in physics at the University, Gabriella decided to dedicate her life to Yoga in the tradition of B.K.S. Iyengar. She has been studying with the Iyengars yearly since 1983. Since '87 she has been teaching at her own Studio in Florence as well as offering workshops worldwide.