

flexible body & mind

by Lila Conway



When we think of yoga we often think about stretching and flexibility. Many people shy away from the practice of yoga, thinking they are too old or not flexible enough. With regular practice the body becomes flexible, fluid and moves with comfort and ease. However, a flexible body begins with a flexible mind. Yoga teaches that flexibility of the physical body; particularly the spinal column and flexibility of the mind go hand in hand. The body is merely an expression, a window of what is happening in the mind.

A truly flexible mind is open, relaxed and can adapt to any situation in life. Whereas when the mind is stuck, rigid and unable to compromise, this directly increases stress on the nervous system and in turn creates a stiff and rigid body. Mental blockages and resistance plus accumulated toxins bring stiffness to the body. The discomfort we may feel when stretching is merely stuck, blocked energy, causing 'dis-ease' in the energy flow. Toxins build not only from the effects of unhealthy living but also due to negative emotions e.g. anger, jealousy, greed...

Flexibility of the spinal column allows the prana, life force energy to flow in the right direction, upwards, past the lower energy centres and to the higher energy centres (chakras). The shakti, or kundalini energy lies coiled in a dormant state, sleeping in the lower

chakras. Through various yoga practices kundalini awakens and rises through each centre or chakra releasing a specific wavelength of energy. For spiritual evolution it is important to raise the energy to the higher centres. In Hatha Yoga we practice physical postures to attain mental flexibility and to get the pranic energy moving properly. When prana begins to flow, toxins and blockages are removed, the body becomes supple and relaxed. When the body is healed and in this comfortable free, relaxed state, only then can we really move from body consciousness and evolve to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the workings of the mind.

When the energy is moving properly you will become healthy, strong, peaceful and naturally radiate strength and vitality to others.

"Having done asana one gets steadiness (firmness) of body and mind; diseaselessness and lightness (flexibility) of the limbs" - Hatha Yoga Pradipika, verse 17 Chapter 1.

Paschimottanasana: The Forward Bend

Paschima means "the West", referring to the back of the body. This asana stretches from the heels to the top of the spine and encourages the life force energy to flow to every part of the body.

Step by Step

1. Sit upright with your legs straight and feet together. Stretch your heels and pull the flesh of your buttocks out from beneath you, so that you are directly on the sitting bones.
2. Take a few deep breaths
3. Stretch your arms above your head with the palms facing each other. Lengthen your spine and lift up out of your hips.
4. Exhale and stretch your arms towards your feet. Fold forward from the pelvis, leading with the chest and keeping your back straight.
5. Bring your chest towards your thighs, taking care not to bend from the middle of your spine.
6. Hold on to whatever part of the legs you can comfortably reach without bending your knees or rounding your back. If possible grip the big toes of the feet with the first two fingers and thumbs of both hands. Bring your elbows to the floor.
7. To release, exhale and slowly return to the starting position.

Practice Tips: Don't try to force your head to your knees as this will curve the spine. Instead, aim to bring the torso as far forward as possible, while keeping knees and spine straight.



A Few Benefits: Stretches hamstrings and increases flexibility in the hips, tones and massages abdominal organs, removes fat, invigorates nervous system

Caution: Respect your body's limitations and inner wisdom, if something feels wrong, please do not do it. Avoid during pregnancy or if you have a slipped disc.

"This is the most excellent of all asanas... stimulates the gastric fire, makes the loins lean and removes all the diseases of men" - Hatha Yoga Pradipika

The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga by Swami Vishnudevandanda comes highly recommended for deeper study. For details on Lila's yoga classes and retreats, go to www.yogaprema.org