

Vinyasa sequencing and transitioning

Saturday 30th June 2018 - St Mary’s Church, Glastonbury

Vinyasa

‘Vinyasa’ means a sequence of practices that are placed in a particular order in an intelligent and thoughtful order in order to achieve a certain aim. The term usually refers to a sequence of asana.

nyasa means ‘to place’ and *vi* means ‘in a special way’

Wikipedia has a short interesting entry on this, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viny%C4%81sa>

Sequencing

The way a vinyasa is constructed will have a big effect on the experience of the practice. Aspects to consider are:

- speed (how many breaths or seconds per asana)
- whether there are resting/reflective poses between more challenging asana, or not
- the nature of the transitions between poses (eg. guided or unguided, effortful or easy, fast or slow, straightforward or complex movement)
- the nature of the poses included (eg. a lot of backbends will create a very different energetic effect to a series of forward bends)
- the order of sections of the practice (eg. standing, supine, prone, all-fours, seated poses sections)



An illogical sequence that doesn’t work energetically will cause irritation or imbalance in the system. For a coherent and flowing practice, each pose must be suitably prepared for by asana earlier in the practice and form a foundation for what is coming next. Each pose builds on and adds something to the previous poses. A sense of development and progression, with some varied pace, and a suitable beginning and ending, feels satisfying and nourishing. Much like a well-constructed beautiful piece of music. *(The picture above is one of Beethoven’s many musical sketches.)*

Transitioning

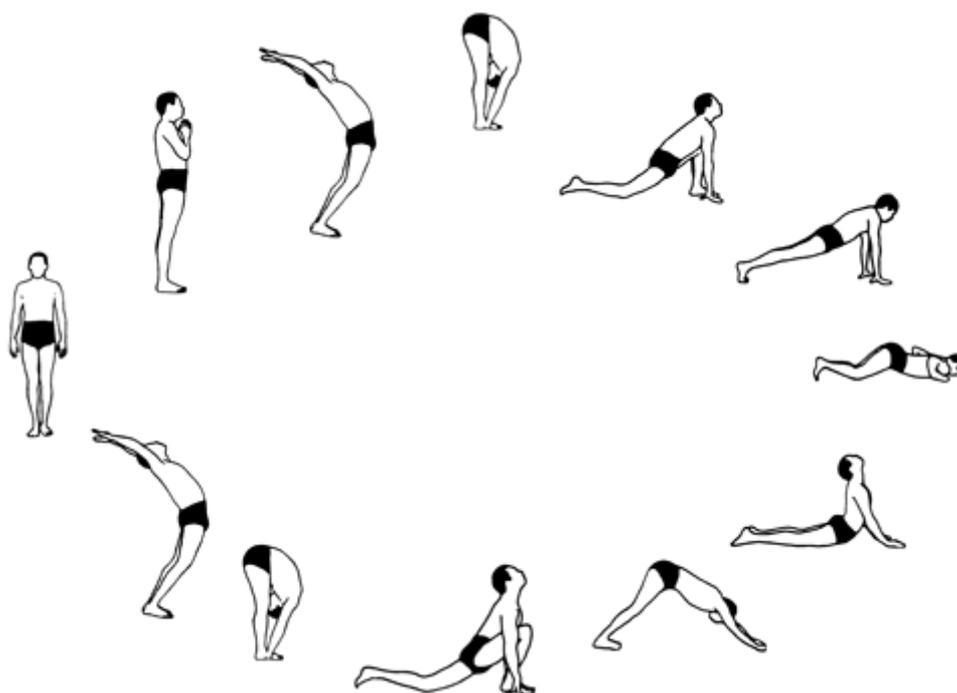
A transition is the movement required to take you from one static asana to another.

Fortunately, sudden injuries in yoga classes are not common, but when this does occur it is usually during a transitional movement rather than while holding a static pose. When teaching yoga the risk of injury can be lowered by (a) giving clear and timely instructions on how to enter and exit a pose and (b) by having a good basic knowledge of anatomy to help students find more easeful ways of moving within the safe range of movement for each joint and with least muscle strain.

The way a transitional movement is made will vary from person to person according to their own limitations, structure and personal habitual movement patterns (see below). Transitions can be refined to become more anatomically efficient and less awkward. As teachers, it serves our students well if we take time to teach and allow students to explore different ways of making these movements.

Flowing sequences

Surya namaskar is a well-known flowing vinyasa where the practitioner moves from one asana to the next with each new breath. The body is in each pose for only a very brief time and there are a number of different transitions between poses to negotiate. There are no resting poses until you reach tadasana or samasthiti at the end of the sequence.



www.sivananda.org/teachings/asana/sun-salutation.html

Some traditions and schools of hatha yoga use set flowing vinyasa sequences as their practice, for example Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, Bikram Yoga and classes called 'vinyasa flow'.

Transitions are challenging to negotiate in fast-moving vinyasa. They do become easier with practice and familiarity, however any non-optimum habitual movement patterns will be reinforced rather than changed with repeated practice of the same movements in the same way. There is also risk of 'repetitive strain injury' if practising the same thing the same way frequently.

It is difficult to work on refining transitions during the practice of a fast-moving sequence because of speed of practice, so incorporating work on transitions as a separate part of a lesson is of benefit to students. They can apply what they learn to the practice of the sequence itself. A sound knowledge of basic functional and practical anatomy is required to teach this in a useful way.

A varied yoga asana practice avoids potential repetitive strain. Slower paced vinyasa, incorporating held asana and brief resting poses between each pose, allows time for the body to rebalance before the next pose, and also allows time for giving guidance on transitions.

Planning a whole practice

When planning a lesson, as well as incorporating practices that students have been working on recently, and poses that link to the theme currently being explored in your teaching, it is worthwhile stepping back a bit to get a wider view of the practice as a whole.

A useful question to ask ourselves is – does it work energetically overall? Is there an appropriate beginning to focus the mind and a way of starting to move the body that works for the group and the setting? Is there a build up to a peak part of the practice, and then a settling down towards a relaxation or meditation at the end? Are all the poses suitably prepared for at some point earlier in the practice? Are there smooth transitions between individual poses, as well as graceful transitions between parts of the practice? Does the order of practices make for a flowing experience?

All poses have a particular start position, and they can be characterised according to these. These are: supine, prone, all-fours/kneeling, seated and standing.

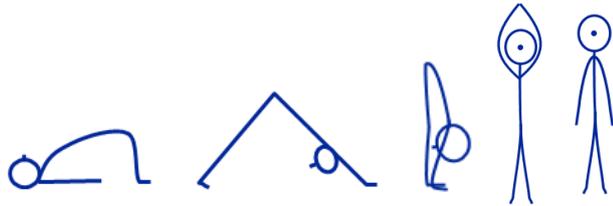
If the poses of the same start position are grouped together in a practice, this makes for a more flowing practice. A lot of ups and downs between being on the floor, sitting and standing, within one practice, can affect the feeling of flow. (This is sometimes difficult to avoid in workshops, the aim here being different.)

Transitioning swiftly from supine to standing is generally best avoided. It requires a sudden shift in blood pressure in the head, and on rare occasions can cause people with low blood pressure to faint, or more likely to feel dizzy. Inserting a pose where the head is above heart, eg. bhujangasana, a lunge, or any simple seated pose, will provide a graded and comfortable transition from the floor to standing, giving the blood pressure time to acclimatise.

Indeed adding a ‘transition pose’ in a sequence is often a good way to bring a flow to a transition which otherwise might be too demanding or students might find awkward. For example:



Would work better than

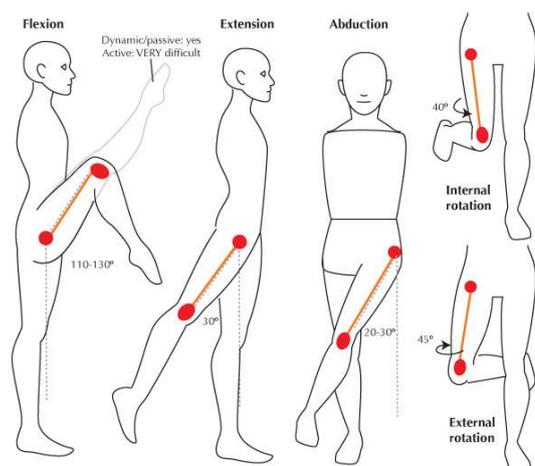


If you ask students to move from one position to another, eg. lying to sitting, or dwi pada pitham to adho mukha svanasana, without giving any guidance, they may do it gracefully and mindfully or they may do it awkwardly. If you observe any clumsiness or strain, usually involving held or laboured breathing, then this breaks the flow of their practice and is disturbing to the system. Additional guidance here on how to make a transition, or adding in a transition pose, would be helpful to them. This guidance given can teach students to incorporate transitions as a part of the practice, and also often this is a chance to teach useful and safe transitional movements which students can take off the mat into everyday life, eg. getting up off the floor.

Transition from the floor to standing is the most challenging. Transitions moving from up to down are relatively easy. We will explore the teaching of these transitions at the workshop.

Anatomical integrity

A basic knowledge of anatomy is essential to maintaining anatomical integrity and keeping students safe in their practice. It is important to know what the natural range of motion for each joint is so that students are not forced to move in unnatural ways that a joint isn’t designed for. For example, any twist on the knee is not good for the knee joint, even more so when the leg is straight or if the knee is in hyperextension. Reducing eccentric contraction in muscles when entering and exiting poses helps to build strength without compromising the integrity of the body.



<https://design.tutsplus.com/articles/human-anatomy-fundamentals-flexibility-and-joint-limitations--vector-25401>

Only a basic understanding of anatomy is needed to teach yoga. However by deepening your knowledge and understanding further, you will be able to better help students and give more specific individual coaching to refine their movements and transitions.

At the workshop we will explore the relationship between the feet, lower leg, thigh and pelvis in transitioning between *tadasana*, *uttanasana* and *utkatasana* and how and why this varies in individuals. We will consider foot positioning and the tracking of the knees and how we can consider different individual patterns in our teaching in an inclusive way.



Individual movement patterns

As humans we share basic elements in common – two arms, two legs, a spine, a head, organ systems, language, mind, emotions, social relationships, life experience. In this regard we are all mostly the same. These similarities allow us to teach yoga practices which can be practised by all.

In addition we all have our individual differences. Structurally we have the genetically formed body we were born with, along with any scars and postural traits we have picked up along the way. Functionally we each move differently, partly due to our structure, but also due to personality, upbringing, teaching received, copying others, cultural influences, trauma, significant life events, lifestyle, etc. These differences are unique to each individual and are to be treasured!

Attending a yoga class gives us the opportunity to move our bodies (and minds) in a different way. We experience other ways of doing things by following the way of the teacher we are working with. As teachers we are sharing the practices we know well and our approach to these with our students. So to some extent we need to ask students to do things 'our way' so they gain the benefit of experiencing something different. At the same time we need to respect and treasure the individual qualities of each student – their strengths and weaknesses and where they are in their learning. For example if we instruct students to work with straight parallel feet, which in theory is a good idea, in practice this will put strain on the knees of a person with very tight hip rotators. So we need to find ways of guiding students through transitions that are accessible and appropriate to them as individuals.

We need to strike a balance between guiding students and letting them find their own way. As teachers we need to be aware of which transitions are 'safe to get wrong' and which movements may put strain on the knees, lumbar spine or neck if practised incorrectly. These are vulnerable areas of the body, and so clear guidance is needed here. And we also need to know when idiosyncrasies are not unsafe and can be incorporated into a practice.

Roots and wings

As well as thinking about shapes of poses and positioning of body parts, when we move from pose to pose there is a shift from one energetic pattern to another. Each pose leaves what I like to call an 'energetic wake', which is still remaining in your system when you move into the next practice. The way you practice one pose and transition, will affect the quality of the next pose.

Much of this is to do with how the body/mind relates to the ground (gravity) and how it relates through the senses to the space around you. Working with spatial awareness and gravity can provide some useful teaching points which help students navigate through a transition in a more graceful way.

Helping yoga students find their 'roots', developing a good relationship with the ground in a pose, the flesh yielding into the floor, allows the body to feel supported which allows it to feel strong and relaxed. Graceful movement flows from that.

Helping people find their 'wings', reaching out into the space, opposing the kind of concentric posture we often see due to stress, fear and sedentary living, while also staying with the ground, again allows the body to better organise itself gracefully in movement and often allows the student to do more than they thought they were capable of.

This approach can assist students in flowing through a vinyasa from one pose to another. Use of language is critical here, which we will consider in more detail at a later workshop.



<https://www.askideas.com/38-unique-birds-tattoos-designs/>