

Yoga in Schools

By MJ Glassman

Neo-humanistic education is deeply entwined with the ancient practice of Yoga. The practice of Astaunga Yoga in school acts as a cornerstone for student's spiritual, physical, and social development. It is the foremost method for children to gain greater self awareness. Because of its importance this chapter will be entirely devoted to it.

What is Yoga?

While there are 8 major domains or branches that define yoga, most people think of the physical postures or asanas when we speak of yoga. Yet more and more interest in the fullness of yoga is finding its way into the mainstream of educators who are looking for a more comprehensive and meaningful curricula. The 8 limbs of Astaunga Yoga include:

--insert astaunga yoga tree

1. Yama ~ The 5 keys that guide spiritual aspirants in their external relationships with others and the world.
2. Niyama ~ The 5 keys that guide spiritual aspirants in understanding and balancing their internal thoughts and feelings.
3. Asana ~ Therapeutic body postures that are comfortably held.
4. Pranayama ~ Breath awareness and balance.
5. Pratyahara ~ Sense withdrawal from the external world.
6. Dharana ~ Mental focus and meditation.
7. Dhyana ~ Sustained concentration on the Divine.
8. Samadhi ~ The fullest expression of being human is realization of one's Oneness with the Cosmos.

Astaunga yoga is a systematized process for the progressive evolution of the body-mind-spirit. All Astaunga yoga practices guide children towards the goal of becoming an ideal human being. These yoga experiences contribute to maximizing their potential, guiding them to the fullness of all that they can be. All activities are adapted for young children so that they are age appropriate.

Children are encouraged to consider themselves as being more than a physical body. They are spiritual beings who guard and nurture the Inner Radiance in themselves and in others. What is a 'yoga experience' for children? Yoga is any interaction, activity, or experience that involves any of the 8 domains of astaunga yoga--not just asana postures—which have been adapted to the interests of children.

Developmental Awareness

Young children between the ages of 3-5 years of age are entering a highly creative and intuitive developmental phase and so it is essential that the yoga experiences reflect these aspects. The young child's primary quest concerns: 1) Attachment (Who loves them), 2) Identity (Who they are), and 3) Competency: (What they can do). The practice of yoga is where all three of these sectors intersect.

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Sector 1: Attachment ~ Who Loves Them.

In interactions with students the facilitator always has opportunities when she is physically affectionate and caring with the students. She can give a touch on the head or shoulder, a tap on the back, a playful wiggling of the foot as well as verbally caring such as "I love your snake pose." "That is an excellent choice." "I love how gentle you are with your friends." "You are such a good friend." "I love you."

The facilitator is always looking for ways to let children know that they are loved by the teacher, loved by the other children, and, whenever appropriate, loved by the Divine. How can we refer to the Divine in a universal way and in a way that respects the diversity of the various religious paths that may be represented by the families in a classroom? This, of course, varies from community to community and requires some thoughtfulness. Yoga is theistic so it is important to find some

acceptable way in which the class can refer to the Creator. Universal terms can sometimes be effective: “Inner Light,” “Mother Earth,” “The Force,” “Mother Nature,” or concepts that reflect in a universal manner something much greater than one’s self.

Sector 2: Identity ~ Who They Are

By bringing into the class affirmations and framing all interactions with positivity, the teacher can support children in being all that they can be. Children can be the Helpers of the Universe. They are the Light of the World. To help children embody this concept, facilitators invite children to stand with their feet wide on the floor, stretching their arms high, and they say, “Shine your Heart Lights into the world. Shine happiness on the trees. Shine happiness on the animals and on your mommies. Shine your Heart Lights on _____(a sad classmate.)”

Young children are searching for their place in the world. Like the coach inspiring the sports team to be enthusiastic, to do great things, to be all that they can be ~ the facilitator brings words of inspiration, words of happiness, words for overcoming fear and self doubt into the asana class. Children may hold a standing lunge position with arms stretched upward (Warrior 1) and repeat loudly “I am a super star! I am awesome!” Encouraging children to repeat these words loudly has the power to root these qualities in their hearts and to believe in their Divine Potential.

Sector 3: What They Can Do ~ Competency

No doubt they can hop like rabbits, slither like snakes, fly like the bats, roar like lions, sway like the elephants. Just as the early yogis learnt from and named asanas (postures) after the diversity of beings that populate the world, facilitators encourage physical motions with the characteristics of these animals. Be brave like the tiger. Be strong like the bear. Be graceful like the flamingo. Be fearless like the giraffe. Be swift to get away from a bad situation like the crow. Be gentle like the feather. Be sweet like the honey bee. Be beautiful like the flower. Be loud like tyrannosaurus Rex. Be quiet like the turtle. Be helpful like the dog. Be loving like the cat.

Competency in Yoga also includes enabling young children to see and understand how their actions effect others, essentially the laws of cause and effect. What happens when you use a loud voice, gently pat someone on the back, hit someone, tell someone ‘I like your smile,’ or say “Can I play with you?” Facilitators constantly are coaching children as to why certain behaviors and actions are preferable and why some are undesirable. They can call positive actions, "warm fuzzy," and

undesirable behavior, "cold and prickly." Empathy and kindness are constantly reinforced and discussed at every opportunity.

Yoga Domains 1 & 2: Yama and Niyama

Yama and Niyama comprise the ethical foundation of yoga and are the first domains of Yoga. They are ancient guidelines for cooperative living and compassionate lifestyle. Here is a simplification for 3-5 year old children.

Ahimsa: Kindness, No hurting. *I am friendly. I wear my "warm fuzzies" every day*

Satya: Honesty. Consideration. *I speak up for myself and others.*

Asteya: Responsibility. No grabbing. *I take responsibility for my actions.*

Brahmacharya: Mutual respect. Unconditional love. *We are different and I love you.*

Aparigraha: Simple living. *Just two will do.*

Shaocha: Cleanliness. Orderliness. *I put away what I use.*

Santosha: Contentment. Acceptance. *I am happy. I can "move on".*

Tapah: Self-restraint. Patience. *I like to help and take care of my friends.*

Svadyaya: Understanding. *I like to learn what my friends like.*

Iishvara Pranidhana: Spiritual focus. *I take shelter in "Goodness".*

Yama and Niyama in the Classroom

Yama and Niyama concepts are introduced in the classroom through conversation, songs, discussion, stories, artistic expression, and dramatic play, including puppets. There are many benefits from them. By providing a clearly defined moral foundation for interaction, it reduces stress, frustration, and confusion. The guidelines support the children in properly caring for themselves and others. They enhance a sense of safety and comfort, and establish harmony in the classroom. The classroom's ethics create a small microcosm of what the world can be like. Lastly, ethics enable the young child to catch a glimpse of the Infinite in everything.

Yoga Domain 3: Asanas

The young child can be highly egocentric and is becoming increasingly aware of the complexities of relationships. As they begin to form relationships with the world, they tend to ascribe personal thoughts and feelings to all living beings: rocks, trees, and animals. Eager to embrace the magical aspects of life, yoga experiences are a wonderful venue for deepening their yearning to understand the mechanics of the world around them, as they explore everything, trying to make sense out of the adventure of life.

So yoga experiences for young children are expressed in the way they learn best ~ through exploration, experimentation, imitation, and creativity. Imaginative play is their bridge to reality and their methodology for learning and understanding, internalizing from experience and exploration rather than through instruction and direction.

Asanas are postures comfortably held and presented in a way that includes movement, breath awareness, sensory involvement, focus, creativity, and fun. It is important that these adventures be in alignment with developmentally age appropriate best practices. Still discovering what their bodies can do, they thrive on investigating the world through their motor organs: jumping, hopping, spinning, crawling, rolling, flying, as well such as catching, throwing, pushing, and pulling. Arms, hands, legs, knees, and feet are engaged in active and relaxing movements. The sensory aspect is of special importance. This means showing visual pictures, making sounds, and providing kinesthetic experiences (poses that engage the hands, feet, and skin) whenever possible.

While many poses may initially resemble adult postures, they quickly morph into the world of fantasy, play, sound, and movement since this is how the young brain is wired for learning, understanding, and integrating within their being.

How is yoga asana introduced to young children?

When interacting with very young children, it is important to fully understand the developmental and brain needs of each child. As you can imagine, asana experiences for the young child are substantively different than what one would see in an adult asana class. The young child loves repetition and will enjoy repeating their yoga experiences over and over. Engagement of all the senses is paramount along with increased doses of creative movement, sound, and imagination. Every pose is enlivened and energized.

Asana practice for young children is a creative, interactive experience. The asana poses do not need to be rigid classifications like adult asanas, a child can be designated “Lead Child” and can interpret the pose in new ways for the other children to explore, with suggestions from the facilitator when needed. This fosters self confidence, independence, and a sense of self worth as a valued contributing member of the community.

Use of Yoga Cards - Having some sort of cards or pose representative enables the asana experience to be child-directed rather than teacher-directed. It allows the kids to make the choices and to guide the experience rather than having the adult be the facilitator. Yoga cards can be made by the facilitator from simple photos of animals, insects, vehicles, and so forth. Calendar pictures also make excellent yoga cards.

Vocalization – Children are invited to re-enact verbal sounds of animals or vehicles with yoga poses. A rhyme, poem, chant, or song may emerge. Instruments such as shakers or bells can even be included.

Other Props – Scarves, paper streamers, puppets, or other representations of the animals, bugs, or items can be included in some fun way.

Words or Gestures of Endearment – These are offered frequently by the facilitator. Perhaps the teacher will go around the room and stroke the back of each turtle or the head of each lion. Asana time is when the facilitator compliments the students, giving them words of encouragement. The facilitator may assist in making ocean sounds when everyone is busy being ‘boats.’ The facilitator constantly searches for new ways to make the asana experience more interesting. For instance, she can place a stuffed toy between the knees of each “alligator” as the alligators’ mouths (the child’s legs) open and shut: “chomp, chomp chomp.”

Relationship Building – Opportunities to develop relationships are built into the asanas. Seated children can pair up with feet together and hands together to “row their boats merrily down the stream.” As children move together forwards and backwards, they are reminded that “We are friendly.” “We move together with gentleness.” “We are being careful with our friends.” Children can work as a large group seated or standing, holding hands in a large circle. They can become a great forest, a rose garden, or a giant flower that is opening and closing in harmony. Facilitators may introduce animals or insects that some students may be a little anxious or fearful about in order to present something positive and wondrous about that creature and the gifts it bestows on the world.

Asana Methodology

At the base of asana learning is repetition. Repeating poses supports the development of determination and perseverance. Young children love repetition! The poses make physiological changes to the children. Crawling on hands and knees and crossing the front mid-line of the body engages both hemispheres of the brain. Placing the tongue on the roof of the mouth is calming. This can be done in Balance poses. Young children's bones and muscles are not fully formed so poses such as shoulder stand and other poses may not be done well but can still be adapted.

Make sure that the yoga experience is going to appeal to boys and girls. Please review this list of possible asana choices and consider will some of these appeal to one gender more than another? Flower, princess, butterfly, fairy, ladybug, bird, bear, elephant, hammer, helicopter, warrior, train. In order to maintain a fun atmosphere and the active participation of all children, poses must reflect their gender and individual interests.

Yoga games, stories, songs, art, drama, and other expressions of creativity may also be incorporated. Creative exploration activates many centers of the brain. When introducing a pose invite the children to find other ways to do it. Classes may be a wonderful mixture of teacher direction and student direction. Let playfulness prevail.

Class Themes

Often children are exploring various themes in school. Nature and science concepts easily blend into the yoga experience such as:

- Reenacting a day in the life of a bear with its bearlike interactions with friends, enemies, food, what it loves, what it avoids, and what it offers the earth community.
- Dramatizing rain and snow and their nurturing relationship with animals and plants.
- The clash and cohesion in the lives of mountain goats (Billy Goats Gruff).
- The specialties of preying mantis, scorpion, ladybird, ant, and other insects.

When learning the same loving approach is shared with creatures which children may fear as the ones they like. These wondrous relationships are explored as children discover the diverse creatures and astonishing environments of our amazing planet, their value, and the gifts that they bring.

Asana Flow

The length of a yoga class will depend on how much time is available. It may range from 12 minutes to 30 minutes. Ideally the facilitator will develop a ‘flow’ so the children can predict how the experience will unfold. Starting with a song, rhyme, or chant is a delightful way to bring everyone together. Having yoga cards or other representations can be helpful in guiding the class and with transitions between poses.

Yoga class has much experimentation. Often when children are given permission to self-express, they can become ‘overly expressive’ and excited. The facilitator will want to guide or redirect the flow from time to time. If the energy level is accelerating, what can she do to bring it down? Some background information about movement and energy can be useful. Here are some tips to assist the management of energy flow:

- Back bends and movement ~ Are energizing
- Forward folds and resting poses (stationary) – Are calming
- Twists – are neutral

So if the children have performed 2 or 3 asanas such as sharks, airplanes, and gorillas, the facilitator may want to choose calming poses like sleeping bears, rocks, snakes, and starfish-on-the-ocean-floor to bring the energy level back down.

Some Examples of Yoga Class, from Simple to Involved

The asana class may be as simple as having a few children select some asana cards and these poses are repeated for a time. The facilitator may point out interesting variations that other children are bringing to a pose. One pose can sometimes morph into others such as “Who knows what sharks eat? What would that look like? Who are some other ocean friends? (Jellyfish, seaweed, sea turtle, etc.)” Blending asanas with other activities and books on the theme extends and compliments the learning.

Asana class can be more involved and integrated into a story and theme. Here is an example of “a Yoga Adventure to Africa.”

- We are going on Safari. We are walking in a circle, a circle, a circle.

- Going to Africa (clapping hands), Africa, Africa.
- It is far away (hand over eyebrow as if looking far away), far away, far away.
- We are almost there (hand is moving from eyebrow to eyebrow as if wiping away sweat), almost there, almost there. (Jumping up in air and then down). Here we are!
- I see elephants walking!
 - Forward bend until hands and feet are on the ground. Everyone can walk forwards. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 and then backwards, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8.
 - Let's interlace our finger together and raise our trunks up high into the air, trumpeting away 1.2.3.4 times.
 - Elephants can walk bent over swinging their trunks from side to side.
 - Elephants can eat leaves from the trees reaching high with their trunks.(Make smacking sounds with the mouth.)
 - Elephants can spray water on their friends.)Make shhhh sounds.)
- Oh my goodness the elephant has accidentally stepped on the snake. (Scream)
 - Lay down on your tummies with foreheads on the ground. Legs are out straight behind the body. Hands are palms down on either side of the neck. "All snakes will wake up". Pressing down on the hands, everyone raises their chests and heads up, holding the pose (not the breath) for just a moment. Tongues may slither in and out of their mouths. Then all snakes hissssss as they lower their bodies back to the ground. This can be repeated 4-5 times...as one elephant apologizes over and over. (It was an accident. I'm so sorry....etc.)
- The snake forgives the elephant since it was just an accident. The elephant didn't mean to hurt the snake. The elephant helps to lift the snake up into the acacia tree.
 - Everyone stands straight and tall in front of the wall or by a chair with their feet rooted in Mother Earth. Then they bend one knee and bring that foot to the inside of the base leg with the knee pointing out to the side. Palms come together over the heart and then are lifted up, up over the head. As the arm trunks straighten,

the palms open, spreading apart, like a tree branch. Children may lean against wall behind them or place one hand on the chair.

- Children can be individually invited to share who they see in Africa and can invent a movement or pose that matches their animal of choice. (Gorilla, lemur, hippo, zebra, wildebeest, piranha, crocodile, etc.) Each pose can be repeated 4-5 times.
- Oh the sun is setting. It is time for everyone to find a place to sleep. Show me how monkeys sleep? They sleep high in the trees on a lovely branch so I want everyone to find your special branch and lie down. What sounds do you think they make?
- Let's lie on our backs with our hands on our tummies. Feel as we breathe in, the tummies rise high like the mountain and as we breathe out (blowing breath), they come down. Breathe up. Breathe down. Breathe up. Breathe down. Watch your hands on your tummy go up and down. Up and down. Remember all the animal friends that we saw today: the big elephant, the skinny snake,(continue with naming animals), and oh yes, the tree...which is where we made our beds today.
- The closing can be a deep relaxation pose and meditation.

Occupy the Mind with Positivity

Young children experience a lot of stressors in their lives and often have a difficult time measuring up to the expectations of themselves and others. They experience fear of separation, 'not being good enough', and anxiety. In yoga class young children love the magical power of affirmations. These are important tools to protect their minds from negative, defective thinking. Sprinkling an occasional affirmation can support the development of their inner courage and stronger self-esteem.

- I am kind.
- I am a Good Friend.
- I take care of my friends (family).
- I am strong (brave, powerful).
- I can do it!

These can be blended with powerful poses, such as warrior and hero postures. Affirmations are generally constructed in the present tense as a condition or ability that is possessed right now! They may be strongly affirmed with loud voices! As you become more familiar with the students and their life experiences, other affirmation ideas will emerge.

What are some benefits of yoga asana?

Yoga postures for young children are easy and not strenuous. The facilitator engages students in the culture of physical fitness, mental/emotional fitness, fun and caring for friends. Yoga postures strive to achieve all-round harmony of mind and body. Asanas can strengthen muscles and bones, increase flexibility, balance, and body awareness. They maximize effects on blood and lymph circulation, support and strengthen lungs and respiration, balance hormonal secretions, stimulate bone development, and regulate digestive activity. In fact, yoga asanas maximize the balance of all the physical systems of the body.

Perhaps the most apparent benefits that clinical research have shown are the many profound effects yoga has on the nervous system: reducing anxiety, inviting calmness, redirecting emotions, minimizing hyperactive and aggressive tendencies (temporarily), and balancing emotional moods. Yoga class provides laughter, joy, and positivity. It strengthens participants relationships and withdraws their minds from undesirable thinking.

Depending upon how one facilitates yoga, it can also build student's confidence and determination, support their positive attitude, reinforce tolerance, acceptance, and respect of others. It can enhance creativity and intuitiveness. During yoga, opportunities arise for conflict resolution, turn taking, and sharing.

At the root of yoga there is the spiritual aspect. And so the yoga experience invites a deeper caring relationship to the earth, humanity, and all living beings. It increases a desire to interact with others in a kind and harmonious way. Yoga asanas gradually improve interest and ability to meditate, awareness that we are more than our thoughts and emotions, and a sense of inner peace and contentment. Yoga asanas embody an acknowledgment of a Greater Force that is directing the amazing Dance of Creation.

Domain 4: Pranayama

The Science of Breath

Yogis believe that prana is the life force that flows in and out of our bodies and all living beings. We take it in when we inhale and release it when we exhale. Prana is everywhere. Pranayama is the science of yogic breathing and is the fourth limb of Yoga. It involves controlling the movement of prana or energy through the use of various techniques. Every technique has a particular goal such as heating, cooling, soothing, and energizing.

Pranayama, breath control, is the heart of most practices and is what distinguishes yoga from other physical practices. Breathing is a natural and primarily involuntary process. Respiration oxygenates organs, muscles, cells, and soothes the nervous system. Pranayama incorporates proper diaphragmatic breathing where the chest opens and the lungs expand. Abnormal breathing frequently occurs high in the chest. This can trigger the fight or flight hormonal response and can manifest as breathing at a fast, shallow pace. Shallow breathing tends to overstimulate the sympathetic nervous system and can cause other general health problems.

In pranayama, usually breath is through the nose. Incoming oxygen is better filtered and purified with nasal breathing than through mouth breathing. Pranayama activates the relaxation response which calms the nervous system and lowers respiration and heart rate. The breath naturally becomes slower, facilitating an even deeper relaxation response.

How Is Pranayama Introduced to Young Children?

The breath rhythm has three basic parts: exhalation, inhalation, and the pauses in between. Most forms of yoga retention of breath and other adult practices are not recommended for children because the nervous system and lungs are not fully developed until years later. With younger children the emphasis is on the inflowing or inhalation and the out flowing or exhalation. This can be further simplified by saying ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’.

Many young children who experience high stress have already begun to develop improper breathing patterns. Unhealthy breathing can be imprinted on children by their parents. Breathing patterns have a profound effect on emotional well-being. It is the teacher’s aim to support young children in the following ways:

- To be able to slow down and deepen their breathing
- To enhance their awareness of the breath

- To provide abdominal breathing experiences
- To increase their understanding of how breath can be used to manage stress.

Medical studies have confirmed that there is a correlation between breath, thought, and many physiological responses. A harmonious mind is created and sustained by slow, deep, and regular respiration. Proper breathing holds the key to a balanced mental state.

Yogic breathing is closely connected to the abilities of memory and learning. We learn better when the breathing is calm. The calmer and steadier the breathing is, the stronger the power of mental receptivity. So children's learning capacity can be enhanced with a calm body and calm mind. The retentive power wanes tremendously during physical or mental restlessness and anxiety.

Oxygen purifies the blood and is good for the nerves. Full oxygenation of the blood and organs invigorates the body, inspires the mind, and gives a sense of well-being and contentment. By learning the art of pranayama, children become aware of how a calm mind is associated with deep breathing.

Pranayama Methodology

Breathing is taking in oxygen found in the air. What is air? The existence of something invisible such as air can be demonstrated with young children in many ways:

- Blowing up balloons and allowing them to deflate around the room.
- Making paper fans and then having the children fan themselves. "Can you feel that? Can you feel it touching your face?"
- Taking students outside on a windy day and letting them observe the effects of the wind.
- Blowing feathers and catching them.

Supine Belly Breathing

Children can become more aware of abdominal breathing with the following steps:

1. Children lie on their backs and place a small stuffed animal or toy on the belly of each child.

2. Close your mouth and breathe through your nose. Watch your toy go up and down as you breathe. Now it is going up. Now it is going down. Now it is going up. Now it is going down.
3. Use your breath to move the toy. (Continue for 1-2 minutes or until someone gets restless.)

Yoga Breath Centering for Young Children

There are various games involving breath to help children slow and center on the breathing process:

- Ahhh Breath – Take a deep inhale breath followed by an exhaled “ahhhhh” breath while folding forward. (Seated or standing)
- Balloon Breath – Take a breath. Place your hands on your belly button. When you breathe, breathe all the way down to your hands. Feel your tummy expand like a balloon? And then the balloon gets smaller and flat. Breathe into your balloon...and then let it go. What color is your balloon? Make your balloon belly really big. This be practiced lying down with the hand on the belly or with a toy on the belly. (Seated, standing, lying down)
- Bee Breath – While seated, pretend you are a bee. Breathe into your balloon belly. When you are ready to exhale, make a very high-pitched “hum” like a bee. Make it loud. Make it long. Place your hands over your ears and do it again. This is fun to do while flying around the room!
- Big Bird Breath – Children are standing. On the inflowing breath the wingtips are lifted high above our heads. On the out-flowing breath dive/bend forward and touch the wingtips to the earth.
- Brave Breath – Deep inhale. Deep exhale. Repeat 3-5 times slowly. Can sometimes be practiced with a partner or teacher as well as in a circle with everyone holding hands.
- Chopping Wood Breath – Stand with the feet hip width apart or wider and join your hands together as if holding an ax. On the inhalation, raise the ax up high overhead. Stop for a moment. On the exhalation, swing the arms downward, holding the ax, with a “ha” sound. Knees may or may not bend as the ax descends. On the inhalation, swing the ax high overhead once again. (The ax can transform into a hammer if they do not understand what an ax is).
- Dragon Breath – Take a deep inhalation. Then on the exhalation: ROOOOOAAAARRRR.

- Mother Earth Breathing – Breathe in. I feel happy. Breathe out. I feel happy. All of Mother Earth’s children are breathing with us. Raccoon, Eagle, Rabbit, Bear, Whale, Ant, Tree. They are all breathing with us. (Seated or supine)
- Rabbit Breath – In a kneeling position inhale through the nose in 3 quick breaths. (Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.) Exhale out through the nose in a long breath, fold downward and bring the forehead to the earth.
- Shhh Breath – Take a deep inhalation. Place your pointer finger on your lips and exhale a long ssshhhhhhhhhh while making eye contact with everyone in the room.
- Snake Breath – While seated, simply inhale through the nose, then on the exhalation make a hissing sound, slowly, slowly. (The exhalation should be longer than the inhalation).
- Sunshine Breath – Inhale as you reach up for Father Sun. Grab some sun! Exhale as you bring the handfuls of sun into your heart. Hold that sunshine in your heart with your hands. (Add a song or chant if you like).
- Smell the Flower and Blow out the Candle – Curl your fingers a little on one hand so that it resembles an open flower with the palm facing up. Hold the pointer finger up on the other hand, pointing towards the sky. Smell the flower with your nose in your flower hand then lean towards the other hand and blow out the candle.

Pranayama Flow

Pranayama or creative breathing exercises can be practiced at the beginning of yoga class as a centering practice, go in the middle, or at the end. Often breathing exercises lead into chanting and meditation. It is very helpful to create breathing cards. Breath Cards can be made with photos of the children or pictures of the animals or plants represented in the breath exercises mentioned above.

When facilitating a breathing experience, remember that the goal is to achieve a particular uplifting and fun mental/emotional state of balance. This state of mind is the response to a physiological exercise. Consequently, all breath experiences should be repeated 3-5 times in order to bring this result. If a total of 1-3 breath cards, for example, are chosen, that is a total of perhaps 15 breaths to recalibrate the physical body in an effort to evoke the desired mental/emotional response. In

addition, you will notice that all of these exercises have one thing in common. They all lengthen the exhalation breath. This is another essential part of this process.

When facilitating simple pranayama experiences, it is important to always surround these activities with the higher feelings of love, goodness, happiness, and that sense of being surrounded by love, caring, and positivity. These feelings maximize the benefit of the exercises.

Of course, breath exercises are not employed only for yoga class and meditation time. Breathing exercises with the breath cards can be used any time a child (or facilitator) is frustrated, angry, or off center....or if the energy level of the entire class is escalating. The facilitator invites a child to practice a Breath Card with a friend, the whole class, or the teacher at other times of the day. Encourage children to invent other breaths.

Summary of the benefits of Yogic Breathing

Through attention to the breath, children tap into the fullness of who they are. Greater understandings shine through with a new, fresher perspective. Yogic breathing exercises can help to improve stress management and help overcome fear. Deeper, fuller breathing clears out stale air and improves the quantity of oxygen filling the lungs. When breathing is most efficient, fresh oxygen is supplied, the lungs are strengthened, and there is also an improved emotional stability. Children feel self-confident, self aware, and equanimity of mind.

Pranayama directly effects the total functioning capacity of the brain and the nervous system. It supports better integration between the physical, mental, and other layers of our being. A regular pranayama practice during school time increases receptivity and focus. It reduces blood pressure, improves overall oxygenation of organs and cells, calms emotions, and results in more positivity.

Domain 5: Pratyahara or Sense Withdrawal

Sense withdrawal provides greater calmness and self-awareness. Usually children are very sensory occupied. Children need help in learning to withdraw from their senses. In yoga there are various methods to introvert the senses. Young children primarily learn it with the practice of Shavanansa or deep relaxation pose. The key goal of Shavasana pose, deep relaxation pose, is to induce a state of relaxation and to withdraw from the external environment by closing the eyes, the mouth, and

resting the hands and legs. It is generally practiced lying prone on the ground. It can be presented at the end of the asana practice and/or as meditation.

How Is Pratyahara or Shavasana Introduced to Young Children?

In the Shavasana pose the children lie down on their backs with arms at their side. Shavasana is beginning meditation. It is relaxing with mental alertness. Very young children may need some support calming their energy down. What kinds of experiences can the teacher include to facilitate serenity? Calming music, dimming the lights, speaking slower, speaking quieter, ringing a tiny bell, and so forth aid the children's efforts.

The shavasana experience can take many forms. A facilitator can read or tell a short story while children are lying in shavasana. Another is the use of short visualizations and imagery. Students can be reminded to close their eyes and paint pictures in their heads. Visualization assists them maintain focus and concentration by activating several brain centers. For instance, ask the children to imagine that the clouds in the sky are filled with love and they are pouring love down on them. They are bathing their bodies with love from head to toe.

Simple affirmations may be used here to support the students in achieving a relaxed and sweet state of being: I am calm. I am relaxed. I am OK. The teacher may sing *Baba Nam Kevalam* (Love is all there is) softly over and over or play briefly soft music. Be sure to allow a very brief time for stillness and quiet. The facilitator can gauge when to stop it. Here are two examples of Shavasana experiences.

Shavasana with affirmation and winding down movement.

- Ahhhhhhh. I am calm. I am peaceful. I am happy.
- Raise your foot and drop it to the ground.
- Raise your other foot and drop it to the ground.
- Raise your arm and drop it to the ground.
- Raise your other arm and drop it to the ground.
- Stick your tongue out and say ahhhhh. Put it back in your mouth.
- Raise all your arms and legs and drop all of them to the ground.

- Open your eyes and blink them 3 times. Then close them
- Ahhhhhhh. I am calm. I am peaceful. I am happy.

Shavanansa and visualizations:

“You are sitting in the lap of Mother Nature surrounded by the light of love. The Love Light is filling you up. The light is covering your feet, your legs, your tummy, your chest, your shoulders, your arms, your hands, your neck, and your head. Your whole body is filled up with light. You are shining like the moon at night. You are sitting in the lap of your Divine Friend who is always with you...and who will always be with you....”

Shavasana Flow

During the shavasana practice, the teacher may review points, comments, and ideas that were shared throughout the class about kindness, sharing, and gentleness. The facilitator puts an enormous focus on love and positivity. Remember that the mind is more malleable when relaxed. She may ask the children to say inside their heads, “I am Great. I am Good. I am Love”. “We are Love. We are Light.”

Initially the shavasana experience may be 1-3 minutes. The teacher observes the children for restlessness as to when the practice should end. She reminds the children to breathe in, make the tummy big, and breath out, make the tummy small. Shavasana is another time to nurture their relationship with every child by gently touching the head of every child.

Some Benefits of Pratyahara or Shavasana

Pratyahara or Shavasana clears the mind, reduces stress, supports an inner connection, and magnifies the feeling of connection with the Shining Light Within. It can increase concentration, attention, and intuition.

Domain 6 – Dharana or Concentrated Meditation Flow

In young children, Dharana is equivalent to meditation preparation by chanting. Chanting is the rhythmic speaking or singing of words or sounds. Chanting a mantra, sacred text, name of God, or

other words is a commonly used ancient practice. There are two basic types of chanting. “Japa” or “personal chanting” is where one chants alone. Chanting in a group is called “kiirtan.” Kiirtan is usually accompanied by musical instruments, clapping, as well as other movements and gestures. Young children particularly enjoy kiirtan.

Chanting with a Mantra

Mantra is the transformation of breath into sound. This sound may be a single syllable or a group of words. Clinical studies indicate that rhythmic breathing and repetition redirect negative thinking and can bring a more positive mental focus. The actual word “mantra” means “that which liberates the mind” so using mantra has the capability of uplifting moods and minimizing negative thinking patterns. It is extremely effective in transforming and balancing the emotional well being of young children. Rabbi Shefa Gold said about chanting, “Chant is a bridge between the inner life and the outer expression, between the solitary practice and the shared beauty and fellowship. When we chant we are using the whole body as the instrument with which to feel the meaning of the sacred phrase.” xxxxxx need source of quote xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Many mantras are derived from the Sanskrit language. The Sanskrit alphabet is based on the inner sounds emanating from within the body, specifically from the 50 glands clustered around the chakra. Advanced meditators attuned their minds to these inner sounds and each sound became one letter. There are 50 glands, 50 sounds, and subsequently 50 letters in the Sanskrit alphabet. So the Sanskrit language is the human body’s eternal song. The careful combination of Sanskrit letters can vibrate these glands, creating a powerful elevating effect on the mind.

Mantra is a tool that young children can use to direct the mind towards positivity. By engaging in a mantra practice, children choose the thoughts that define who they are-what they want to feel and believe. Mantra and kiirtan can be key to withdrawing the young mind from distractions and negativity. Chanting or singing mantra is a salve that heals the wound of disrupted peace during stressful times.

Chanting and Kiirtan Methodology

When singing kiirtan, the breath becomes slow and deep due to the lengthy exhalations. Consequently, many of the benefits of pranayama, the science of breath, are applicable to chanting as both of these practices have the shared benefit of relaxing the sympathetic nervous system. With a calmer mind, children make the best decisions. Mental equipoise influences also their feelings of peace

and harmony. Children pick up on each others' better feelings and thoughts when they are projected during chanting. This is how the world becomes a better place. Like a spiritual aspirant said, "If one does kiirtan from the bottom of one's heart, with full bhava (devotion) and prem (love) even the trees, birds, and animals will respond. They will be deeply influenced. Such is the power of kiirtan. It brings the devotee face to face with God."

Chanting Techniques

With young children, chanting may be with words and/or sounds that have meaning or no meaning, simply because they like to play and explore everything, including sound. The following are a few fun chanting experiences that can be shared with children either as part of the meditation practice or during a literacy activity:

- The vowels: Ahhhhh. AAAAA. EEEEE. IIIIII. OOOOO. UUUUU
- Consonants: MMMMM. SSSSSS. Shhhhhh, Shhhhhh.
- Om. (The cosmic or psychic sound of all living beings working together).
- International words for "Peace" such as Śhanti (India). Paz (Portuguese/Spanish). Amani (Swahili). Salam (Eritrea).
- International words for "Hello" such as Shalom (Israel). Jambo (Swahili). Aloha (Hawaii, U.S.). Namaskar (India). Konichiwa (Japan).
- Affirmational chanting, i.e., Love is above me. Love is below me. Love is all around.
- Baba Nam Kevalam. (Love is all there is)

The universal mantra, Baba Nam Kevalam (Love is all there is), is a favorite chant of children. Young children think and feel the meaning when they repeat this mantra silently or aloud. Facilitators can combine the meaning with the actual singing of the mantra. For example, "Baba Nam Kevalam. Love is all there is."

Singing the mantra prior to meditation or even during meditation prepares the body-mind for stillness. All of the children can sing it together and while they are meditating, the facilitator can continue singing it softly. The chanting melodies may range from a simple monotone to a few notes to

a highly complex melody. Any tune can accompany the mantra. When singing together, children love moving their hands: clapping, holding hands, and clapping partner's hands. They enjoy waving their arms, sweeping them overhead, behind the back, and so forth. And don't forget those feet: stomping, marching, twirling, and jumping. Dance movements can also be added.

Vocalization of Mantra

There are five levels of chanting vocalization: 1) singing loudly, 2) softly, 3) a whisper, 4) only the lips moving (no sound), 5) inside (completely internal). Let the children experiment with the five levels.

Position

Chanting can be practiced with young children while sitting or standing, prior to meditation, during meditation, or during shavasana (yoga deep relaxation pose). A drum may be played, a bell chimed, a singing bowl engaged, or other instrumentation if desired to close the meditation.

Chanting Flow

Singing need not occur only during meditation. One may break out into a chant at any moment during the day. It is particularly effective when a child (or teacher) is experiencing sadness, frustration, or burnout in order to change a personal flow or the group flow. Chanting can also be expressed when feeling happy or joyful, or for absolutely no reason at all!

Benefits of chanting

Chants, songs, and mantras provide "technical support" for young children in directing the mind toward a specific positive goal. Through this practice we are choosing the positive power that certain syllables evoke. Kabir said, "If you want the truth, I'll tell you the truth. Listen to the secret sound which is inside you. The One no one talks of ...He speaks the secret sounds to Himself. And He is the One who has made it all." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX quote source XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Chanting, Baba Nam Kevalam, is a method for regaining and maintaining peace during stressful times. When a child feels stressed, 5-10 minutes of focused chanting (especially external) can clear away negative thoughts that obstruct connection to Inner Harmony. Scientific studies indicate that repetition of certain sounds has a calming effect. When sad or frustrated, it can uplift the emotions and refocus the attention towards positivity. Singing Baba Nam Kevalam, as it is a mantra of love and connection, accelerates the speed of one's momentum towards achieving that Supreme State of Balanced Being within. The mental clarity that comes from chanting, can help young children to find solutions to problems and can provide relief from physical and psychic ailments.

Domain 7: Dhyana Meditation or Sustained Meditation

Meditation is the touchstone for self-transformation and ongoing spiritual development. It is the practice of quieting the body and filling the mind with the highest positive Good and holding it there for a while.

How is Sustained Meditation Introduced to Young Children?

Since young children may find it difficult to focus on an idea or a point, often the “point” of focus is on sound. Yogic meditation is not emptying the mind of thoughts and maintaining a thought-free mental void. Yogic meditation is a process of guiding the thoughts and filling the mind with the Highest Good. This may be achieved in a variety of ways, but some time dedicated to mantra, the highest, subtlest of sounds, is essential. Baba Nam Kevalam, Love is Everywhere, is a favorite.

It takes time and practice to focus the thoughts. The young mind is restless and needs something to grab onto so having the facilitator sing or whisper Baba Nam Kevalam throughout the meditation can assure a more successful experience for the young child. The child's mind, thoughts, and body are further focused by visual aids (within and/or without) and with kinesthetic experiences through mudras (gestures) or holding something in their hands. Visual, auditory, and kinesthetic involvements are blended with feeling the love, feeling the light, and feeling the goodness.

Meditation Methodology

Preparations for Meditation

As a preparation for meditation, singing, chanting, and yogic breathing can bring the unity of spirit and quieting of the mind and body. Inviting children in conversations about “What makes you happy?” or “Who loves you?” can be helpful in bringing positive feelings to their mind, heart, and body which is key to yoga meditation. The facilitator may want to guide this discussion towards things that Mommy, Daddy, or friends do to make us happy rather than physical objects. The children can hold these feelings in their hearts with their hands over their chests during meditation.

The meditation experience has to be both child directed and teacher directed. Children participate more readily when they are involved and given some responsibility concerning the experience. Think about ways to give children choices so that they may participate in a more dynamic way. Daily chose one or two “Lead Children for the Day” to decide what hand position or mudra shall the group express today. How many times will the chant be repeated? Will the children sit or lie down? If seated, will the eyes be open or gazing at an object? If open, from the facilitator’s plate of nature objects, which one will be the focus of the day-sitting in the middle of the circle?

Meditation Positions

Meditation is practiced in a position comfortably held. For the very young child meditation is sometimes more effective in a lying down position which minimizes distractions. Young children are naturally conditioned to being relaxed when prone. In the Shavasana position they can actually hold their meditation for much longer than when seated. However, seated meditation is also beneficial of course.

Meditation Techniques

- Nature objects ~ Giving each child a nature object to hold. Student may hold a shell, a stone, a pine cone, fairy or dragon tear.
- Story meditation ~ Compose a very short story (fiction and/or non-fiction) children hear while meditating.
- The children may sit or lie down silently while the facilitator gently sings or chants *Baba Nam Kevalam*.

- Bell – The bell guides our way to our inner home within the heart. Softly ring the bell throughout the meditation. Allow it to resonate OR ring it once at the beginning and once at the end. Have a child help you in ringing the bell.
- Candle Gazing – Chant together, “I am a child of Light. I bring Light to every one” and gaze at a candle. Notice the blue at the bottom of the flame – the brown in the middle of the flame. Can you see the wick? Look at the bright yellow part of the flame. It is warm. Repeat, “I am a child of Light. I bring Light to every one.”
- Dragon Smiles – Each child may be holding and rubbing a glass dragon tear in one hand. Every time you rub a dragon tear with your finger, a dragon somewhere in the world smiles. (Smooth polished stones also works for this. What other happy things can happen in the world every time you rub the magic stone?)
- Little Light of Mine – Invite all the children to tap lightly on their hearts and to look down at their hearts. “Touch the Light. Smile to your Light. Feel your Light. It is always shining deep in your heart even in the night.” “Listen, listen, listen to my Light. It shines in my heart even in the night” You can speak to your Light. “Hello Little Light are you there? Hello Little Light are you there?”
- Rainbow – Paint a picture in your mind with your eyes closed of the rainbow. Pick one color and cover your whole body in that color. Paint your body from your head to your toes in that color. How does it feel? Isn’t this wonderful? It’s a color shower.
- Flower – Get a rose or other flower. You may get one that will be passed and shared in the class OR you may give one flower to every child. Each one of you is like this flower – beautiful and handsome. You smell wonderful. Everyone is coming to see you, to be near you. Everyone loves you and wants to play with you. Everyone wants you to be their friend.
- Singing Bowl – Invite the sound of the bell. Listen, listen, listen to your heart’s song.

Meditation Flow

The length of the meditation may be very, very short in the beginning and as the children become more comfortable the time can be lengthened. It should end when they get too wiggly. For 3-5 year olds, four minutes can be a very long time in a group setting.

There are techniques that the facilitator can implement to extend the meditation experience. The facilitator may bring an item and place it on each child's heart while they are lying down. (They will wait for you to come.) "When I see that you are being still, I will place a small animal (or nature object for example) on your heart. You may touch the animal, but please keep your eyes closed. Please stay still." The facilitator will sing Baba Nam Kevalam for a few minutes while placing an object on each heart.

When closing the meditation, consider a sweet song and a collective action that is performed together or individually such as blowing out a candle, holding hands, etc. to conclude this activity and bring unity of purpose and loving to the group.

Benefits of Sustained Meditation

There are countless clinical studies on the benefits of meditation. For young children it gives them the opportunity to enjoy the experience of stillness and calmness. It can also encourage the development of concentration, determination, and patience. Meditation engages the brain in many ways, including self-regulation. Such a practice, overtime, brings mental contentment. Psychological and emotional benefits include the stimulation of imagination, memory encoding, lessening of mental storage and retrieval problems, and balancing the emotions.

Domain 8: Samadhi or Self Actualization

Samadhi is the result of practicing all of the other domains of Astanga Yoga. It is the perfect state of equilibrium derived from the daily determined investment of heart, mind, and body in the performance of spiritual yoga practices. The benefits of Samadhi are profound, long lasting contentment, and an actual experience of the Infinite.

In the classroom any steps of contentment, love, relaxation are building blocks for Samadhi. It is the result of all the positive effort in Astanga Yoga. To help more clearly focus the children towards Samadhi, Neohumanism is indispensable. Neohumanism draws upon the extending of love, affection,

and reverence not only to every human being but to all living beings. This is natural for children. Neo-humanism redefines every step of education to emphasize this. Every realm of life is engaged in it.

In the world of yoga the concept of living or being alive is not exclusively designated only to those that breathe, but includes all life (animate and inanimate) - the air, the minerals, the dirt, plants and trees, insects, beings of the air, all who walk or slither or hop on the earth, as well as those who swim and thrive in the seas. Like indigenous cultures throughout the world, neo-humanism emphasizes how humans share kinship with all created beings of our global family and must live in a way that demonstrates this. Every yogi strives to not intentionally harm any living being and embraces each member of the creation with benevolence. All entities are perceived as expressions of the Divine ~ the One in the Many and the Many in the One.

In meditation, children and teachers can extend their most precious treasure of unconditional love towards everyone. The children are in a collective flow like an ocean wave, moving with all living beings together in harmony. Remind children in their meditations they are love, love is all around them. Everywhere is love. They will get glimpses of samadhi, profound universal love.

By incorporating all the steps of Astanga yoga, children catch the aim in life is to increasingly love and care more for themselves, for those around them, and for every being. Its daily practice gives deeper meaning to and makes sacred the education process. Children's group effort to perform Astanga yoga accelerates every individual. They become Beings of Light to each other and find their own brilliance shining brightly inside themselves.