

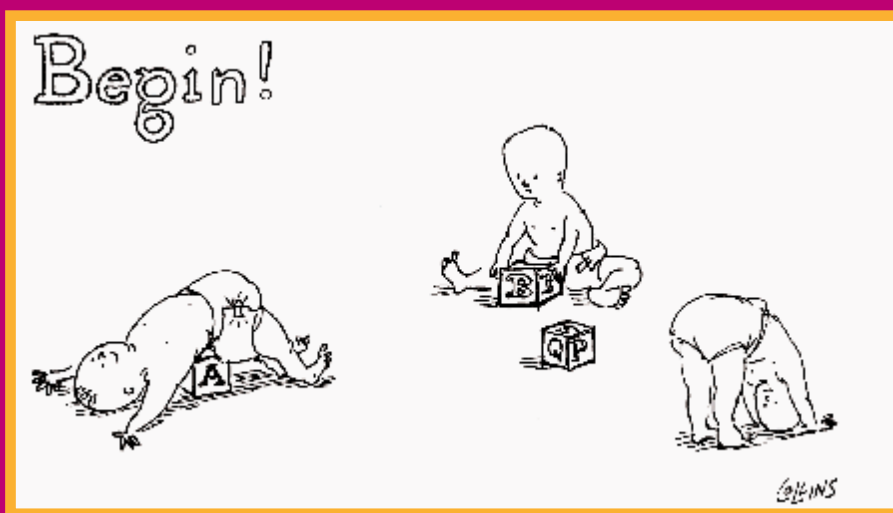
Getting Started

YOU'VE PUT YOUR TOE THROUGH THE DOOR, AND THE TEACHER'S SEEN YOU.

THERE'S NO TURNING BACK. BUT DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S AHEAD?

BELOW ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU 'UNDERSTAND', AND ENJOY YOUR FIRST

FEW YOGA CLASSES... BY ALISON KEANE



CARTOON FROM RICHARD COLLINS YOGA CALENDAR 2000

Most yoga classes range in duration from one to two hours. It's best to stay the entire time because each class follows a carefully put together plan, which generally includes a restorative or relaxation pose at the end.

You don't have to wear the latest trendy sports gear. Do wear something comfortable though. A t-shirt and leotards are ideal for women, and shorts or lightweight track pants, great for men. Be aware that certain inverted postures may cause a loose-fitting shirt to ride up around your ears.

It's best not to eat directly before a yoga class. A light snack one hour before is okay, and a heavier meal, no closer than three hours before a class. Wait at least half an hour after a class before eating.

Some students bring their own yoga 'sticky' mat to class. Others bring a piece of camping foam for added support. It's usually not necessary to bring a mat for the first class, and

most teachers provide them anyway. Consider bringing a light blanket, particularly in winter, to help keep you warm during the final relaxation. Again, this may be supplied.

A lot of teachers start with a simple relaxation exercise. Others simply invite students to focus attention on the breath. Usually there are some stretching and limbering exercises to warm up muscles and joints. These exercises protect the body from injury during later more strenuous poses.

Yoga postures, or asanas as they are known, are usually accompanied by controlled breathing. That is, you may be asked to exhale when bending forward, or to inhale when lifting back up from a strong standing pose. Working the breath with body movements takes practice and time. Don't expect to achieve this first time around.

The teacher may use language that sounds strange at first, like "breath up from the base

of your spine", "lead from your heart in this pose", or "get a sense of your abdominal organs moving back towards your spine". Sometimes it's easy to lose track of when you are supposed to inhale, exhale, or hold your breath. It's really okay to ask if you don't understand. Or, if you are feeling self-conscious, wait until the end of the class. In the meantime do what you know you can do.

You may find some postures easier than others, depending on your level of flexibility, strength and fitness. It is important to work at your own level. Yoga asanas can become intense, but you should never hold a pose if you feel sudden intense pain. If you feel pain afterwards, this too is a sign that you may have gone too far. Again, don't be afraid to share concerns with your teacher.

Each posture and breathing pattern has a distinct purpose and function, which you will find over a period of time, can help relieve a wide range of conditions such as tension and back pain. Don't be surprised if you find you are able to do an asana easier on one side of the body than the other.

A yoga class usually ends with a relaxation pose. Sometimes time is set aside for sitting in meditation. Here, beginners will be guided by the teacher.

Once you have mastered, and can remember a number of poses and their purpose, you can practise them according to your own particular needs. Try to spend at least 20 minutes a day to practise your poses, more if you have time.

Do home practice at a regular time each day, and ideally in a part of your home set aside for yoga and meditation. Allow for a period of relaxation after your home workout, at the least, a minute or two of conscious breathing.

The regular practice of yoga brings both tangible and subtle rewards over time. Don't be discouraged by seemingly more able or experienced students. They all attended a first class at some time. Everyone has their strengths, even in yoga.

It is best not to form an opinion after only one class. If you are still not enjoying the class after a few times, and want to continue with yoga, find another teacher.

Finally, in the words of yoga master. BKS Iyengar, "yoga should be an expression of joy. Enjoy your practice!"