

“Love is the only form of strength which has no limits.”

Kino MacGregor

yoga perspectives

how fast does yoga go?

by Mia Forbes Pirie

“Infinite patience brings immediate results” Wayne Dyer.

Over and over, this phrase has changed my life and my practice. It sometimes slips my mind but I am always grateful when I remember it.

Modern society often seems to be in a hurry. Although most of life is made up by moments of journey, the goal is typically the focus and many of us make a habit of striving towards it. In Yoga, as in the rest of life, that striving is typically counterproductive in the longer term: it results in less achievement than the alternative of being present. Nevertheless people become addicted to constant movement, trying and busy-ness. Habits are hard to break.

The path of Yoga is the path of changing habits and patterns. Patience is a cornerstone, not a mere virtue. Kino MacGregor, Ashtanga Yoga expert, explains that in order to develop a new habit to the point where it happens naturally and effortlessly, a person needs to repeat an action a minimum of 1,000 times. The average is closer to 10,000. Kino tells her students these statistics not to discourage them but to help them understand the importance of patience, perseverance, and a good mental attitude.

It is a paradox that to achieve more, in Yoga and in life, it is vital to slow down and engage with whatever we are doing in this very moment. Habits of striving and busy-ness creep onto our mats and

hamper our Yoga practices. Although people may think they are achieving more in an instant, actually they are not. Another related paradox is that to achieve more we have to set less ambitious, (aka. more realistic) goals.

timing and pace in different traditions – blurring the boundaries

Different traditions tend to be associated with different speeds or timings. Although there is some truth to that at a structural level, there are perhaps more similarities than there are differences.

It is often said that postures are held for different amounts of time in different traditions. A rule of thumb is 2 to 2 and a half minutes in Iyengar, 5 breaths in Ashtanga and 5 minutes in Yin.

Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga and Anatomy expert, explains that asymmetrical postures are generally held for 2 to 2 and a half minutes on each side. 5 breaths is often the time period associated with Ashanga Vinyasa Yoga. But how long does it take to take 5 breaths?

I timed myself taking 5 long and deep breaths (without forcing or trying): 2 minutes 16 seconds, which is astoundingly close to the times for Iyengar and Yin asymmetrical postures. The Ashtanga method demands that practitioners take long and deep breaths. On the mat, people have a tendency to take shorter breaths when they



Strength built slowly - Kino MacGregor's workshop

are struggling but that is not the intention of the method. It is possible to take 5 short breaths in 20 seconds, but that is not what the practice has in mind!

The 5 breaths of Ashtanga Yoga are merely a guide. Personally, if I feel that I am breathing faster than normal and am having trouble slowing, I make sure that I take more breaths. Hamish Hendry and Kino MacGregor, the UK and Florida's leading Ashtanga instructors respectively, both say that there is no limit to the amount of time Ashtanga allows a practitioner to spend in a posture. I remember Guruji, the late Sri K Pattabhi Jois and founder of the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga tradition, being asked how long people could stay in headstand. He said that 30 breaths was a good length of time but they could stay as long as they wanted. When pressed further as to whether there was a maximum time, he responded that it depended on what else they had to do during the day.

Taking too much time to get into postures, however, can be an excuse or an avoidance technique. That is one of the reasons for Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga's relatively quick transitions between postures. In Iyengar-based traditions students typically take longer to set up postures and get into them. Ruth White, senior Iyengar student and UK teacher trainer recalls, however, that Iyengar would get people to work faster if there was fear in a posture so that they did not have time to doubt themselves.

Generally, it is true that holds are longest in Yin Yoga. Sarah Powers, Yin and Insight Yoga expert, practises other traditions alongside Yin. She believes that Yin was an appropriate complimentary discipline to the more active styles because "having time in practise, to really touch into the material which is sometimes underneath what is most obvious, requires that we are still for longer". It is in the stillness that much of the change occurs.

the speed of progress

Slow is not the purview of Yin Yoga. Often, the more advanced the practitioner, the stronger the recommendation to take ones time. Saraswati, Guruji's daughter says: "Don't hurry, this practice takes time, the more you try to rush it, the more you will miss what it is actually about.... Everything has its own time." Sharat, his grandson, tells of a time when Guruji did not give him an additional posture for a year. It was not until he gave up wanting and expecting a new posture that Guruji decided that he was ready for it.

Kino MacGregor was one of the weakest people when she started yoga. A self-proclaimed lump of "jelly" on the mat, she is now one of the strongest women in Yoga and one of the few in the world practising the fourth series of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. Coming from such a place of physical weakness, Kino has broken down each element of the body to teach herself the strength she needed to be able to progress in her practice. Beyond anatomical structure, Kino repeatedly returns to the same recommendation for building strength: move slowly and deliberately.

Moving slowly develops the slow-twitch muscle fibres which David Gorman explains are those needed to stay in a pose without fatiguing, as opposed to the fast twitch fibres, used for actions such as sprinting. Moving more slowly develops deep strength and ultimately the kind of muscles which provide effortless support.

attitude and emotions

"Each posture is an attitude", says Ruth White. Yoga helps us to change our attitudes. She advises that we "open the heart" when we practise both physically and emotionally. We are often held back by what Ruth calls "false emotions", fear, anxiety etc. "What dissolves all these "false emotions"", Ruth explains, "is love".

In her workshop on strength, Kino MacGregor says that she is worried that it may sound trite but “Love is the only form of strength which has no limits”. You can always draw on love. The already quiet class gets even quieter as the depth of her statement reverberates around the room and plants a seed of change.

Yoga was intended to be used to develop our whole being. The physical side is intimately linked with the emotional and spiritual, and reflects it. Thus our mental attitude deeply affects the postures we make and our progress towards achieving greater strength and flexibility. Kino explains that when we aim too high, we set ourselves up for failure and continual disappointment. If, instead, we consider success the very act of pushing to get off the floor, (if we are not able to lift ourselves), we create the conditions required to keep repeating the work we need to do to ultimately lift. This approach is very much in line with Aadil Palkhivala’s mantra – “Don’t perform, explore” and Guruji’s counselling to “Think only God” when you practise.



Mia has just launched a new website www.WorldsUnite.org, which complements her current website www.SustainYourself.co.uk. She would greatly appreciate your feedback and there is a chance to win a FREE coaching session.



The calm in the storm – Marichasana B in Kino MacGregor’s lead class

10 do’s and don’ts of speed

DO move slowly and deliberately in your practice. It will help to build strength and the right type of muscle fibres.

DO question what you are trying to achieve. If you have your heart set on “achieving” a posture, Paul Grilley recommends examining your motivation: what do you think you are going to achieve?

DON’T choose more over slower: If you are running out of time in your practice – practise less postures. Always make sure to end in relaxation (either Savasana or a comfortable seated posture). Your practice is about quality not quantity of postures.

DO practise Ahimsa! Make your practice non-violent, and cultivate an attitude of love. When you find yourself being self-critical, treat yourself as you would treat someone else, perhaps a child, with love and compassion.

DO set very small goals. If you have to set goals make them easily achievable ones that will keep you on your mat and keep you coming back for more.

DO slow it down if you feel yourself breathing too quickly. Start by extending whichever side of the breath (inhale or exhale) is shortest to match the other side. Remember – if you cannot breathe you probably should not be there.

DO take more breaths in a posture if you are counting breaths and breathing too fast. If for some reason you are having trouble slowing down your breathing – either stop for a while until it regulates or take more breaths.

DO focus on your breath. If you find yourself straining, focus on your breath and your balance. The breath is a great anchor: just by observe it, it will begin to even out and calm you down.

DO focus on your balance. David Gorman recommends focusing on your balance and distributing your weight evenly across contact points with the ground. Even in seated postures, this can result in amazing transformation.

DON’T beat yourself up. Practise with love.