



Ruth White (right) and Mia (left) demonstrate Warrior 1 posture. Warriors 1 and 2 gently open the hips – they are both Iyengar postures and part of the Ashtanga Vinyasa Primary Series

yoga perspectives

by Mia Forbes Pirie

the hips part 2

Exploring the hips through different perspectives and Yoga traditions

“Mr Duffy lived a short distance from his body”. James Joyce’s description of one of the central characters in his collection of short stories, ‘The Dubliners’, is telling of our society. The purpose of Yoga is to get back into our bodies, feeling comfortable, grounded and stable, able to sit in meditation for extended periods. Hips are central to this. They act as the roots of our connection to the Earth. Open hips are also what allow people to sit comfortably in meditation, which is why most forms of Yoga focus heavily on flexibility in this area.

Nowadays, the habit of sitting in chairs tends to promote stiff hip joints. Ashtanga Vinyasa, Iyengar and Yin Yoga each approach hip opening in a different way – although often through the same postures. When most people think of hip opening postures, they tend to think of postures with strong external rotation like Lotus or *Baddhakonasana*. Arguably, this is missing a big part of the picture. Lotus, for example, is more of a hip open posture than a hip opener. It is the more subtle postures, like Warrior 1 and 2, Upward Dog, Triangle (*Trikonasana*) and even Tree posture (*Vrksasana*) which can be used to start opening the hips, building up towards more challenging postures.

The Ashtanga primary series stretches and opens the hips in all directions. Iyengar Yoga focuses on precise alignment using props where necessary which, used appropriately, further assist the hips in relaxing, releasing and opening. It also allows the practitioner a

greater selection of postures than the Ashtanga Primary Series alone. Yin postures are held longer and target the deep connective tissue working gently to stretch and re-align. Yin offers a greater selection and versatility in practice, enabling a greater focus on an individual’s specific areas of tightness.

the mala of ashtanga vinyasa yoga

It is no coincidence that Sri K Pattabhi Jois, known fondly as Guruji, called his book ‘Yoga Mala’. A *mala* is an unending string of beads, each linked to the next by a fine thread, each having a spiritual purpose of centring and bringing the person holding it closer to the peace that resides within. In the same way, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga practice consists of a string of postures, each building on the previous one, each one linked to the next by a fine strand of breath, and I believe that Guruji would have said, each one bringing the practitioner slightly closer to God.

On the physical plane, the preparation of each posture for the one that follows is nowhere more apparent than with the hip. The opening of the hip joint occurs in stages. Beginning with standing postures, students are taught to create gentle movement in the hip area through *Surya Namaskara* repetitions: forward bends stretch the hamstrings; Downward Dog, the hamstrings and calves; and Upward Dog, the hip flexors and quadriceps. Warrior poses which come into play in the second set of Sun salutations, *Surya Namaskar B*, gently stretch the hip flexors, but a little more than just Upward Dog. *Trikonasana A & B*, *Parsvakonasana A & B* and *Parsvottanasana* use outward rotation to prepare the practitioner for seated postures which

challenge this movement in the hip joint even further. The Warrior posture which comes into play first in the second set of Sun salutations, *Surya Namaskar B*, and then later held for 5 breaths, gently stretches the hip flexors.

Moving into the seated postures, the Ashtanga Yoga method gives students *Janusirsana*, one of the gentlest sitting postures, to focus mainly on outward rotation. Then, in *Marichasana*, students focus on developing dynamic control over their hips joints by focusing on flexion (A), then on flexion on one side, and extension and rotation on the other (B), and finally internal rotation, flexion and external rotation during a twist (D) which builds up towards the pinnacle of *Supta Kurmasana*.

tethered together. The focus of Yin centres on the connective tissue in this area, allowing the Chi, Energy or Prana to flow freely through the meridians.

Sarah Powers explains the 3 main features that help affect the yin tissues (connective tissues) the best. The first is to come into a pose with an appropriate amount of intensity, ie finding one's appropriate 'edge'. The second is to become still when you've reached that edge and to relax engaging the muscles even while stretching them. The third is remaining in the pose for some time.

Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga and anatomy expert, says that there is no standardised ideal way to do a yin posture. It all depends on the individual and their bone structure. It is important to be clear about



The Primary series does not include some of the other beneficial postures which can be practised in Iyengar and Yin Yoga. These are considered more advanced and appear in later series.

Ashtanga postures are traditionally held for 5 breaths, although both Kino MacGregor and Hamish Hendry emphasise that any Ashtanga Vinyasa posture can be held for as long as the practitioner wishes.

Yin yoga

As well as Yoga being designed to enable a comfortable seated meditation, Sarah Powers, Yin Yoga expert, explains that most of the Yin poses focus on the hips because the yin part of the body is below the navel. Due to the gravitational pull, energy tends to become more stagnant here. The upper body is moved around considerably in everyday life, but the lower body is often less active. The lower body's main joint site, the hips, has many bones and many ligaments all

what the primary objective of a pose is. For example, if your intention is to stretch the hip, the hand and head positions will be optional and will change during the time the posture is held.

There are only 2 ways to do a posture 'wrongly' in a Yin practice, explains Grilley: 1) Do it so aggressively that you hurt yourself; and 2) Do it in such a way that you have no effective stress or traction in the desired area. "You're not going to hurt yourself, but you're wasting your time!" He emphasises that an active, living, breathing yin practice looks different for each individual.

Yin postures are generally held for 4 or 5 minutes or more – unless they are asymmetrical. Generally, postures are held longer if working the fascia and ligaments and for less time if working the muscles. "Muscles are more apt to be stretched in a Yang way" says Paul Grilley, "Yin is about plying the joints more than working the

muscles." Yin can be an invaluable way of loosening tightly bound ligaments around the hip joint area.

Iyengar yoga

Although Iyengar Yoga uses the same posture as Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, the practice method differs. Iyengar focuses on alignment. The postures tend to be held for longer, they are practised in a different order, props can be used to support the practitioner, and more postures and variations of postures are available.

Working within one's limits, Iyengar students may practise other postures which in the Ashtanga Vinyasa method are reserved for more advanced practitioners only. For example, *Gomukhasana* (Cowhead posture), in the Ashtanga series, is part of the Intermediate

postures and Iyengis around 20. The longer times spent in postures and the additional support of props and focus on alignment combine to allow the practitioner to settle into the posture and work gently with his or her own body, allowing more time for the muscles and ligaments to re-align.

These 3 traditions offer different perspectives on how to open the hips. Although different, they each have something rich to offer. The methods are complimentary. They can be used on their own, they can be used in parallel, or inspiration can be drawn from each of them and brought into the primary system the practitioner chooses. Together or separately, they enable the practitioner to achieve optimum hip flexibility and a comfortable seated posture.



(or Second). This is made possible by allowing and encouraging the use of props which make advanced postures more accessible.

Props also help the body to become fully aligned. For example, in *Marichasana B*, the Iyengar method does not favour binding until the body is able to bind fully aligned without straining unduly any part. The Ashtanga Vinyasa method, in contrast, traditionally favours binding, using the bind as leverage to open further and align.

Ideally, Iyengar postures are also practised in an order which will foster progressive hip opening, although this will depend on the objectives of the teacher or practitioner. Other postures, including Tree pose (*Vrksasana*) can be used gently to warm up and open the hips.

Iyengar postures are generally held for 2 to 3 minutes which is longer than the typical 5 breaths for Ashtangis. In an hour and a half to two hour session, Ashtangis will generally practise around 50

- 1 *Janusirsana A*, one of the gentlest sitting postures focussing on outward rotation – Photo: Bob Moy.
- 2 *Marichasana B*, External rotation in half Lotus on one side and good preparation for *Suptakurmasana* – Photo: Bob Moy
- 3/4 *Kino MacGregor* demonstrates a comfortable *Kurusasana* (preparation for *Suptakurmasana*) and *Suptakurmasana* – the most challenging postures in the Ashtanga Vinyasa Primary series, and can be “a lifetime of practice for most practitioners”.
- 5 *Bob Moy* and *Mia* in different versions of *Twisting Dragon* pose. *Paul Grilley* explains how the posture can be practised in a number of ways: start with the right knee forward, left hand or forearm to the floor, right hand resting on or cupping right knee, twisting towards right side. How you hold the right hand is optional and variable as is the position of the head and neck. The focus is on the hips – but how you roll your pelvis is up to your individual discretion – just make sure you feel a stretch. – Photo: Jen Standish.
- 6/7 *Bob Moy* and *Mia* demonstrate different versions of *Yin Swan Posture* (similar to *Pigeon* pose) with different levels of difficulty. Raising the back leg is optional, as are the position of the pelvis and the hands. *Paul Grilley* explains that what is important is not where the pelvis ‘should’ be – but where to feel the stretch. This should be in the lateral portion of the ilial sacral joint, over the bony portion of the pelvis and down the lateral part of the thigh. Physiologically, this is the IT band and, energetically, the gall bladder channel. It has a huge influence over the sciatic nerve, the largest in the body. – Photos: Jen Standish
- 8 *Mia* demonstrates *Gomukasana* (Cow posture) in Ashtanga and Iyengar and *Shoelace* pose in Yin Yoga. This is available to all, with modifications as needed in Iyengar and Yin Yoga. It is a second series posture in Ashtanga, available only to more advanced practitioners. Photo: Bob Moy.

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.