

# An Introduction to Yin Yoga

There are so many different types of yoga that it's hard to keep up with the different styles; all of which stretch the body and engage the muscles in their own way.

Yin yoga is different because the focus is on the deeper tissues worked by passive, longer held poses. The deepest tissues of the body, our connective tissues - ligaments, joints, bones, the deep fascia networks of the body and the meridians - these are the main focus during a Yin practice. The meridians are energy channels running through the body, Yin yoga energetically improves the energy flow of chi (energy) to the organs.

Other 'Yang' practices such as more dynamic styles of yoga or running, cycling, weights etc mainly target the larger, main muscles of the body. To be healthy we need healthy organs as well as healthy muscles which is why having both yin and yang practices provide the best balance. Yin also offers emotional and mental health benefits.

When studying yoga, you learn that mainly there are references to Indian philosophy. Some of the Indian religions such as Hinduism come from the same roots as yoga. Yoga poses also have bewildering names in Sanskrit, which is an ancient Indian language and there are also strong ties with Ayurveda, Indian medicine.

The concept of Yin yoga comes from Eastern philosophy, mainly traditional Chinese medicine. The idea that our body is filled with energy "chi" and runs along pathways called meridians. If you have ever had acupuncture, the needles are placed on meridian points to help with healing. Yin yoga does the same thing, but with yoga stretches (a little less scary).

A yin yoga sequence will typically start as other classes, sitting quietly or laying in constructive rest with eyes closed and grounding ourselves. Then you head straight into a pose, doing a "cold stretch". The muscles need to be cold to allow for gentle stretching or compression of the ligaments, tendons and fascia as they are more rigid than muscles and therefore take longer to stretch.

Most poses are done seated or on the floor and there are no specific "yin yoga poses" they are the same as the other styles of yoga but with different names and held for longer periods of time therefore feeling like a more meditative practice, giving you chance to slow down, go inwards, really observe the body, its limitations, sensations and allows time for you to tune in to 'you'.

Many props are used which enables the body to lengthen, open, create space, support, soften and then find the edge, your edge, where the body is relaxed but still working, not stressed, and you are able to linger there. Though the class is slower, Yin yoga is not the same as Restorative yoga. Some of the classes do have restorative poses, but many of the yoga poses are meant to gently compress or twist the tissue surrounding your joints or your fascia (the tissue that holds your muscles and organs in place). Often coming out of a pose in Yin you will feel a strong sensation as the body rebounds, restorative yoga is more passive and relaxing.

Think of the yin yang symbol: Yin is slower, calmer, quieter, Yang is fast, productive and busy. Many people with “Yang” personalities (myself included) tend to gravitate towards the more dynamic styles such as Sivananda, Ashtanga, Vinyasa Flow etc but the body also needs and appreciates time to slow down, allowing the deep tissue to stretch. It can be challenging at first and mustn't be thought of as an 'easier' style, sometimes it's hard to find stillness and quieten the mind, a few minutes can seem a long time, so it does take practice. The rewards are numerous when patience is given, one of which is that yin yoga poses put gentle pressure on the joints producing more synovial fluid and hydrating the joints, which is critical as we age and to maintain healthy joints.

## **Yin yoga benefits**

- Stabilises the joints by strengthening the more rigid soft tissue
- Hydrates the joints, leading to less wear and tear
- Increases mobility and improving range of motion throughout the body
- Though the muscles aren't the target, they ultimately get a deeper stretch
- Improve overall health by clearing energy blockages in the body (like acupuncture)
- Gives the mind time for meditation during the longer holds

## **The three tattvas (principles)**

1. Come into the pose at an appropriate depth - if it feels too intense or the body feels stressed honour that and back away, release a little, go to a point that you can hold in stillness
2. Be still
3. Hold for the length of time