



Thinking of Starting Yoga?

How to Find the Right Teacher and Class

by Timothy McCall, MD

Many people are thinking about starting yoga as a way to relieve stress, build strength or gain flexibility. Others--suffering from everything from asthma to diabetes to low back pain--hope yoga will improve their health. Some folks are primarily attracted to yoga's spiritual side. Whatever your motivation, one of the first things you've got to figure out is where to begin.

While books and videotapes on yoga have their place, according to Mary Dunn, the senior yoga instructor at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in New York City, there is simply no substitute for a good teacher. A skilled one, she says, can look at the way you're performing the various yoga postures and offer corrections. A good teacher might encourage you to attempt a posture that you're ready for physically but are afraid to try or might suggest that you back off when your strained breathing or a grimace reveal that you're trying too hard.

The trick says Dunn is finding the right teacher. There's also the question of which style to study. The roadmap that follows can help you navigate the maze of choices and find the teacher and style that's best for you.

Finding the Right Style of Yoga to Study

Almost all of the dozens of styles of yoga--a Sanskrit word meaning union--being taught in the United States are versions of "hatha" yoga,. These hatha yoga styles typically combine the study of various postures or asana along with meditation and breathing techniques known as pranayama. Some forms are gentle and are appropriate for people of all ages. Others should only be attempted by people in top condition.

Some of the major types are listed below.

- Iyengar yoga stresses precise alignment while performing the postures. Another characteristic is its use of props such as cushions, blankets and blocks to help students learn the postures. Props are particularly useful for people who aren't very flexible (though with regular practice increased flexibility comes).



- Ashtanga yoga--also known as Power Yoga--is probably the most vigorous style of hatha yoga. Its practitioners perform a series of postures which flow continuously, often jumping from one posture to the next. Many students enjoy the tough aerobic workout but Ashtanga is probably not for people who are less fit or less flexible or for those with serious back problems.
- Integral yoga tends to be gentler, more meditative variety of yoga. It was first popularized by Swami Satchidananda, who is perhaps best known for teaching the crowd at Woodstock to chant om. Integral yoga forms part of Dr. Dean Ornish's program which has been shown in scientific studies to reverse heart disease.
- Viniyoga emphasizes a flowing transition from one posture to the next with great emphasis placed on the breath. Less attention is paid to achieving the proper form and instead the movements are adapted to each individual student. Instructors often teach one on one.

Finding the Right Yoga Teacher

The first step to finding a good teacher is to ask yourself what your goals are. Are you looking for an aerobic workout? Stress relief? Help with a problem like back pain or carpal tunnel syndrome? Also think about whether you have any injuries or illnesses which limit what you can do.

The next step is to phone any teacher whose class you are considering. Richard Rosen, who teaches public classes in Oakland and Berkeley, California and is the Deputy Director of the Yoga Research and Education Center in nearby Lower Lake, suggests asking, "What are your classes like?" If you have any medical problems or other concerns, mention them when you talk to the teacher. Rosen would also ask how many people typically come to each class. If you're someone who like personal attention a smaller class may be better for you. Some senior teachers, he adds, teach large classes but have a number of assistants working with them to help individual students.

Mary Dunn advises inquiring about the teacher's training and certification. She warns that some programs will certify teachers "after as little as a weekend workshop," so be sure to find out what they had to do to become certified. Iyengar yoga puts its teacher through the most rigorous training and certification process of any style of yoga, according to Dunn, which may account for the style's tremendous popularity. She stresses, however, that "good teachers are found in all styles."

After You've Tried a Class

Once you have tried a class, ask yourself if the teacher personalizes the program and gives you useful feedback. Look for teachers who know when a particular posture isn't appropriate for you and who can offer you an alternative. "Good teachers look at what you're doing and teach from what they see," Dunn says, "not just what they know."

Finally, see how you feel afterwards. Richard Miller PhD, a clinical psychologist who teaches yoga workshops around the country, advises steering clear of any teacher who pushes you too hard or makes you feel "less-than" if you are unable to do certain postures. The whole idea, he says, is that "you should leave feeling better than when you arrived."

Further Resources

- Ashtanga Yoga: Information on Ashtanga yoga and philosophy.
- B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga National Association of the United States: Site includes lists of certified Iyengar teachers in the US and internationally.
- Integral Yoga: Information on the Satchidananda Ashram in Virginia. Includes list of Integral teachers in the US and internationally.
- Mary Dunn / Iyengar Yoga Association of Greater New York: Information on yoga classes offered by Mary Dunn and other Iyengar teachers in the New York city area.
- Richard Miller: Information on workshops and yoga classes offered by Richard Miller.
- Viniyoga: Information on viniyoga philosophy and teachers.
- Yoga Research and Education Center (YREC): This comprehensive site includes information on yoga therapy



Timothy McCall, MD teaches yoga therapy seminars worldwide. He is a board-certified internist, the medical editor of *Yoga Journal* and the best selling author of [Yoga as Medicine](#). You can download a PDF of this article and other articles and view his teaching schedule at [DrMcCall.com](#).