

Yoga: On Yin, Yang and Sustainability

Gabriela Ortiz, RYT 200.

As humans living in the Western hemisphere of the world, we've come to experience an equalization of two elements that although connected, are not one and the same: our being and our productivity. We're constantly working, hustling, doing. We're big achievers and are always looking for the next thing to do. Some of us have multiple journals to attend our different affairs: an agenda for engagements, a business journal, a personal diary in which we can pour our thoughts.

Some of us resort to meditation and yoga for a moment of stillness and quiet, removing ourselves from the constant flow of our busy lives. Yet, even in moments like these, especially in our yoga practice, we tend to push ourselves and remain in the mindset of achieving *something*. That could be a physically stronger body, a deeper backbend, a handstand or a mind that does not resort to thinking about the grocery list during a forward fold.

We have all practiced at least one of these philosophies sometime in our lives:

.No pain, no gain.

.Fake it 'til you make it.

.If it's important, make it happen.

These quotes may come in handy in moments where life gets tough or throws us curveballs. However, when we are within the four corners of our mat the goal is quite simple, but not necessarily easy: to just be. To be in the precious, present moment, with the breath, finding balance between effort and ease in the postures. How can we then achieve this balance in our holistic, self-care practices?

We are all familiar with the symbol of the Yin Yang, right? Two paisley leaves within a circular space, one black with a white dot, one

white with a black dot. This symbol is found in traditional Chinese medicine and it represents balance found within all the forces in the natural world. It proposes that opposites complement each other and interact constantly. Dualities like light and dark, masculine and feminine, passive and active are just some examples.

We can find these dualities within the practice of Yoga as well. Yang lineages include Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Hatha and Power Yoga. Postures are strong, active and help activate our sympathetic nervous system. These asanas aid us in increasing our cardiovascular activity, heightens activity in the internal organs, promotes blood flow and oxygenation of the entire body and increases our metabolic rate. \ We can access our sympathetic nervous system by practicing vigorous Sun Salutations, backbends and breath control techniques (pranayama) such as Kappalabhati (skull shining breath) or breath retention.

Our parasympathetic nervous system allows us to restore and relax and also controls homeostasis, which is the body's ability to maintain balance in its vital functions (temperature, blood sugar levels, hormonal levels, etc.). This second part of our autonomic nervous system decreases metabolism, lowers blood pressure and heart rate and promotes blood flow into our reproductive and digestive organs. Asanas that stimulate our PNS include Yin and Restorative Yoga, slow breathing, forward folds, twists and supported inversions like legs up the wall and waterfall pose.

When I started my Yoga journey, I would scroll down Instagram and was mesmerized by pictures of gorgeous women in intricate contortions, finding a Scorpion pose or a King Dancer like it was second nature. I began practicing Vinyasa and Power Yoga, two styles that are considered of Yang, or active nature. My body increased its muscle mass, my reflexes became the sharpest they have ever been and the focus I have been able to maintain has been unsurpassed. But, just as I was doing in my daily life, all I wanted was to achieve contortions. Ultimately this lead to overworking my joints, specifically my wrists and shoulders and caused a sciatica-like, sharp pain on the back of my right leg. Yoga was supposed to heal me and do good to my body. Why was it hurting me? Turns out, I was overdoing my yang practice. I was not giving my body time to integrate and restore.

I have begun to practice Restorative and Yin Yoga, and have integrated these quiet asana sequences in my daily practice. I also undergo about ninety minutes of Yin at least once a week. What have been the results? I'm benefiting from stronger joints, more flexibility, no pain and a deeper meditation practice. Also, I have achieved balance between doing and resting, which allow me to have sustainable habits. I want to be able to do yoga for the rest of my life, and this is the way I will get to that!

The practice of slowing down and taking a moment to process all that I do has permeated into my daily habits. Ultimately, the poses we do within the limits of our mat are tools we can use for our daily living. They help us stay calmer, feel more established and ready to take on whatever life throws at us.

I invite you to take a moment to slow down, grab a few props in your next yoga practice and just *be* for a few moments. You might just be surprised.