

KEY POINTS FOR ALL POSES

>>> TIAS LITTLE

› **AVOID STRAIN, WHILE PRACTICING RIGHT EFFORT.** *Right Effort* in the Buddhist tradition is part of the *Eight-fold Path* toward awakening. Effort should not be too little or too much. Students in the West have a tendency to overexert, to try too hard. This can actually slow one's progress down. One of the defining *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali is:

Prayatna shaitilya ananta samapattibhyam

...which means that when one releases all strain in the posture, one merges with the infinite potential within. From an early age we learn to strive, to achieve—and to over-achieve. Key to your practice is to drop that edge of striving.

› **PRACTICE AHIMSA (NON-VIOLENCE) WITHIN THE PRACTICE OF TAPAS (INTENSE PRACTICE).** Invest your passion in your training in order to realize the gift of the deepest *shakti* [energy or life force] that dwells inside you. Nevertheless, avoid excessive *tapas*, what I like to call “stupid tapas.” That is, avoid strain and irritation in the postures. Do not violate the boundaries or limitations that your body has accrued over the years, but rather work slowly and skillfully to extend your personal limitations.

› **MAINTAIN EXTENSION AND OPENNESS IN YOUR FEET.** The feet are the basis of our energy, the *mula dbara* [root source] of the body. They hold tremendous potential. In every pose the feet should be animate, expressing readiness. I like to think of the feet as *prana* panels that conduct energy back toward the core of the body.

› **BRING A QUALITY OF WAKEFULNESS TO THE PELVIC FLOOR.** However, this doesn't mean locking or tightening the pelvic floor—the perineum should be elastic, alive and receptive to the slightest shift within the posture. Recall the way an animal in the wild activates its intelligence and tunes its awareness via the wakefulness in and around its tail. Move the coccyx slightly into the body to engage spinal motion. Stretch the front of the spine by tethering the coccyx downward and forward. Lift the pit of the abdomen upward. The lower belly is the confluence of *mula* and *uddiyana bandhas*, which are the lift of the core centers in the pelvis and abdomen. Draw up the lower belly center—this will elevate the front of the spine, lift the internal organs and draw the *apana* [the “breath” that governs the abdominal cavity] upward to support *prana* [the breath that moves through the lungs and throat].

› **DO NOT OVERLY CONTROL THE BREATH.** Breathe through your nose (unless congested, in which case it is okay to breathe through your mouth) with a light *ujjayi pranayama* breath. Not every breath is the same. Allow the breath to be organic. Overly controlling the breath fixates us on control. Rather than mastery of the body, delve into the mystery of the body. Particularly observe the way the breath and the fluid systems overlap—the blood, the lymph and the cranial-sacral fluid. Sometimes the breath will follow the flushing effects of the fluid system, and sometimes the fluid system will follow the movement of breath. Watch the breath as if watching the way that the ocean “breathes” on the incoming tide, then the outgoing tide.

› **PRACTICE PRATYAHARA.** That is, don't hold tension in your eyes, ears and nose—and particularly avoid locking the jaw and clenching your tongue. The jaw area is the most common area where people hold tension in the body. The jaw becomes a receptacle for negative emotion such as fear, anger, sadness and greed. In all postures, remember to relax the skin of your face. There are an infinite number of proprioceptors in the facial skin and thus the face tends

to reflect any strain that arises in the posture.

› **HAVE A NATURAL FEELING OF REVERENCE** while practicing yoga by tapping into the gratitude and respect for all of life that fills the space of your heart. Do not *impose* a sense of reverence. Let it be authentic. This takes time and comes with a certain maturation of the practice. It is important not to mimic a system of beliefs onto your practice because a teacher tells you that you should. Adopting a load of spiritual baggage may require considerable work and effort in the future to clear out. So find the tap root of your profound inner longing, listen to the voice inside of you that moves you to your depths and follow the call of spirit that echoes inside you.

› **CONCENTRATE ON INTERNAL FEELING STATES.** That is, cultivate a contemplative practice, one that builds mindfulness and keen observation using *asana* [pose] as a vehicle for reflection. Observe the flow of breath, *fascia* [connective tissue] and the nerve pulsations that travel across the muscles. Notice how your skin feels. Observe the way that the *asana* is constantly changing and transforming. Avoid being mechanical. Always keep the practice fresh, alive and interesting. The practice should be full of experimentation, discovery and surprise.

› **AVOID PRACTICING TOO LONG AND TOO HARD.** This steals from the spirit—there is excess preoccupation with the body. Maintain regular practice either in the morning or the evening, or both. Practice with consistency despite any lethargy, doubt or faint-heartedness that may surface. Teachers should avoid using their teaching time for their practice. Cultivate deep inner listening—to your breath, your moods, thoughts, reflections and dreams that surface through this work. Let this practice be the container for all the events and circumstances that pass through your life. Learn to use practice as the vehicle for letting go of who you think you are and who you think you ought to be.

Tias Little and his wife, Surya, direct the Yogasource studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He teaches yoga intensives throughout the country, specializing in Yoga Anatomy. Tias, who has a masters degree in Eastern Philosophy from St. John's College, brings his training in massage, cranial-sacral therapy and Somatic Experiencing to his yoga teaching—which is itself a synergy of Buddhist meditation practice, and Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga. He and his wife recently built an all natural straw/clay home, where they live with their two-year-old son, Eno.



*the mindful life