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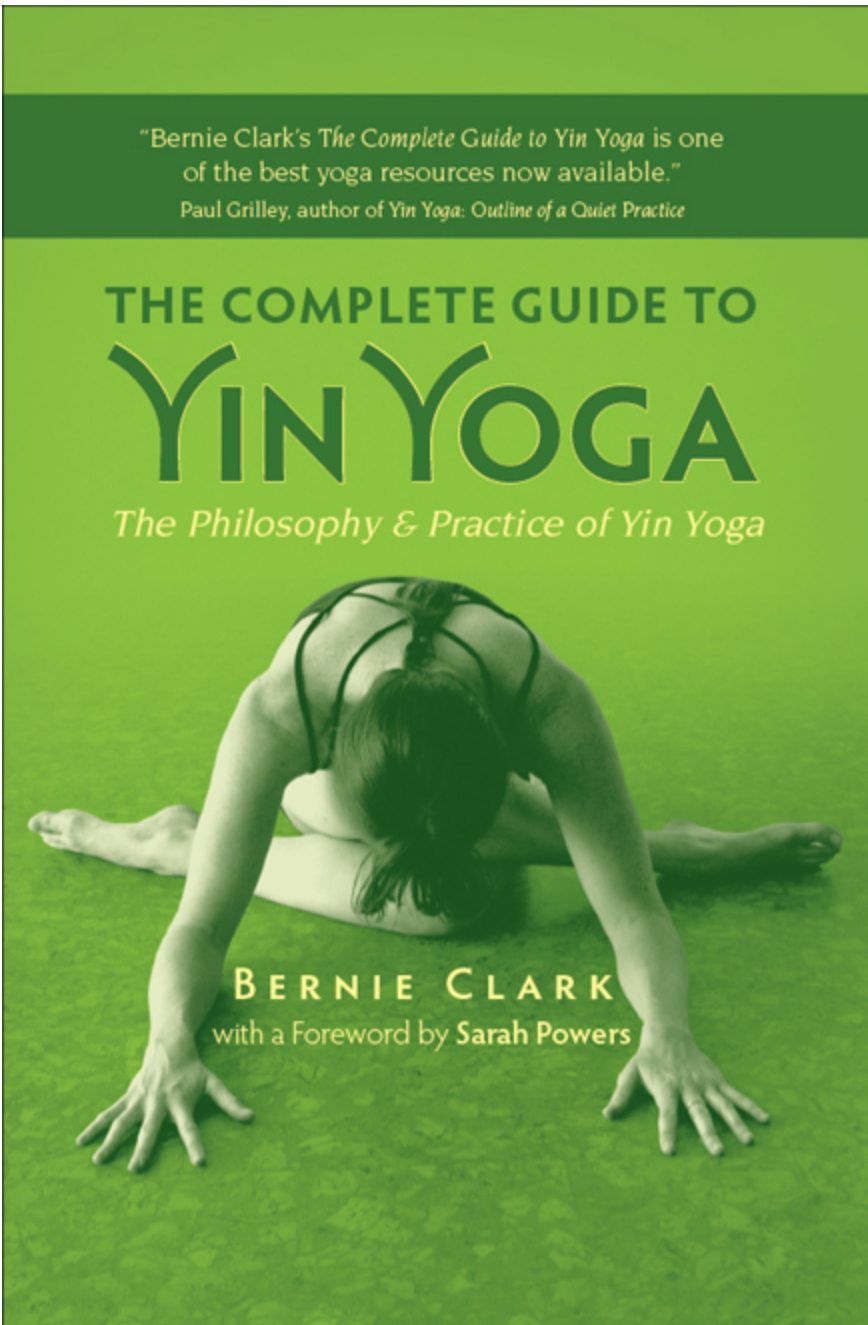
Paul Grilley, author of *Yin Yoga: Outline of a Quiet Practice*

# THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO YIN YOGA

*The Philosophy & Practice of Yin Yoga*



**BERNIE CLARK**  
with a Foreword by Sarah Powers



THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

YIN YOGA

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*The Philosophy and Practice of Yin Yoga*

BERNIE CLARK

FOREWORD BY SARAH POWERS

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For Nathalie, who has come to

share in my belief that yin is truly in!

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[Foreword](#)

The practice of yoga has always been evolving, but essentially yoga is the cultivation of attention. What we attend to and the attitude with which we attend greatly influence how we experience ourselves and our



life. In yoga we concentrate on both form (our bodies and tissues), and formlessness (our breath, energy channels, and mind states). These interconnected aspects of reality are in constant interplay, they are the Yin and Yang of life, and, in yoga we develop and balance these polar complementarities within our body/mind experience. For most of us, beginning with that which is most tangible, the body (Yang) is a common doorway into the practice. As we become less distracted and healthier physically, most students eventually become interested in that which is more hidden. This can be called the yin aspect of reality, which relates with that which is subtle. It is only by paying attention in a relaxed and attuned way that this yin aspect of yoga is revealed.

When students first begin a yoga practice, perhaps to reduce stress or to get in shape, or maybe just to accompany a friend, they will often be guided to place the largest percentage of their attention on the shape of the poses they are trying to do. This keeps the practice safe and as we learn postural integration, our body-based experience becomes more joyous, healthy, and the postures more fun to inhabit. Eventually, with skillful guidance, sincere practitioners become interested not only in the outer forms of yoga, but in the inner revolution that yoga can offer, or, as Bernie might say, they start to go *yin-side*. It is here that the deeper aspects of yoga are revealed.

Paying attention to the fluctuations of the breath, noticing the sensations ebbing and flowing in the physical body, tracking the changing feelings in the emotional body, and recognizing the space of the mind as well as the thoughts in the mental body are all part of yoga. This yoking or joining of the body, heart, and mind provides health benefits beyond simply being more flexible or stronger. The word *health* is derived from an Old English word meaning “whole.” Yoga re-establishes our natural wholeness — the balanced integrity of our yin and yang nature.

Adding a yin or quieter aspect to our yoga practice can introduce us to the possibility of physical/emotional/mental equilibrium by marrying the softer, contemplative modes of being in life to the stronger activities we are so often compelled by. This helps reduce the compulsive extremes of behavior that cause us to lose balance, lose focus, and diminish our joy of living. Yang energy is needed to bring vitality to our yin interior, but it is the gentler yin qualities within us that balance our yang intensities. If you have felt that life is too often not how you would like it to be, then learning the ancient art of deep listening, tuning in to the internal, non-conceptual, softer aspects of your yin nature may be the healing direction.

Yin Yoga, when taught skillfully, can provide this opportunity to go within and re-align our orientation. It will also affect our physical body in

ways that may surprise us. It is simple, but often challenging. It will provide us with ample periods of stillness within which we can start to pay attention to what is really happening, right here, right now. It can provoke insights that may move us to make significant changes in our life or allow us to accept that what is happening right now is exactly what ought to be happening right now. We may discover ourselves opening up to and connecting with our experience as it is, rather than holding on to resistance and feelings of victimization.

For anyone seeking to learn and benefit from the practice of yoga, this book will be an invaluable guide. Bernie has been a student and friend of mine for many years. I know him to be a thoughtful and dedicated teacher who has helped many through his workshops, website, and writings.

Through this book, he is sharing his own practice for all our benefits, seeking to help anyone who desires genuine health and wholeness. Within these pages, you will find explorations on the physical benefits of Yin Yoga and explanations on the ways Yin Yoga helps us energetically as well as emotionally and mentally. The practice of Yin Yoga is described in detail and the various *asanas* are reviewed in a simple way, allowing them to be fully experienced. For those interested, the evolution of yoga in general and Yin Yoga specifically is also presented.

It is with heartfelt encouragement that I invite you to experience opening within through the study and practice of Yin Yoga.

*Sarah Powers*

*New York*

*September 2011*

## Preface

Many readers of my previous book, *YinSights: A Journey into the Philosophy & Practice of Yin Yoga*, wrote to tell me how much they enjoyed reading it and how valuable they found the practice of Yin Yoga.

Along with many emails, there were also requests posted in the [YinYoga.com](http://YinYoga.com) Forum asking for even more information: how to get into the poses described in the book and how to safely come out of them, how to do Yin Yoga for the upper body, whether Yin Yoga would be helpful for unique, special situations, and lots of other questions. Many readers asked about the Daoist history that also informed and influenced the development of Yin Yoga. The demand grew for a second edition of *YinSights* that would cover these and other details of the practice of Yin Yoga.

Unfortunately, a technical challenge arose: adding to the information already presented in *YinSights* would make the book unwieldy. *YinSights* was already over 400 pages long and extending it to answer all the

questions being raised would make the book too bulky. A second edition did not seem like a good idea. Fortunately the opportunity arose to solve this problem by creating, not a second edition of *YinSights* but a new book focused more tightly on the practice of Yin Yoga and its benefits and less on the philosophy and evolution of yoga in general. The result is what you are reading right now.

*The Complete Guide to Yin Yoga* borrows heavily in many places from *YinSights*, but it extends what was presented in the earlier book considerably. Yinsters familiar with *YinSights* will find a few sections repeated entirely but they will also find an expanded description of the Yin Yoga postures, more flows following broader themes, and postures designed to work the upper body. Special situations are also covered, such as how to modify your Yin Yoga practice if you are pregnant or what to do to help you become pregnant. There is a more complete examination of the effects of Yin Yoga on our fascia and also on our muscles too.

Of course the benefits of Yin Yoga go far beyond the physical, and this book will also describe the considerable mental, emotional and energetic benefits we can receive through the practice of Yin Yoga. I hope previous readers will enjoy *The Complete Guide to Yin Yoga* as much as they did *YinSights* and that new readers will be inspired to take a walk on the yin-

side. After all, yin is in!

### Acknowledgements

*Showing the way fearlessly and compassionately,  
the stream of all our Ancestral Teachers,  
to whom we bow in gratitude.*

From *Touching The Earth*, A gatha of the  
monastics of Plum Village, France

Writing a book begins as a solitary endeavor, but never one that starts without encouragement. Along the way, through all the stops and starts, friends appear who give us the strength to continue. There are many people I wish to thank for helping make this guide a reality. Firstly, I would like to thank Steve Scholl and Paul Grilley for suggesting the project in the first place. Of course I would not even be in a position to write about Yin Yoga if it were not for all my teachers, to whom I bow in gratitude.

My eternal thanks to my first Yin Yoga teacher, Sarah Powers, who helped me understand how to slow down and mindfully practice yoga.

*Pranams* to Paul Grilley who introduced me to so many of the concepts presented in this book; to Jim Clark, for keeping me straight on the science.

I would also like to single out the White Cloud Press team who contributed so importantly to the work: to Raina for her tireless and

excellent editing, to Christy Collins for her photography, design and layout, to Cherise Richards for posing again and again, and to Stephen Sendar and Steve Scholl for their patience. I thank also Pilar Wyman for her indexing help.

Finally, my blessings and thanks to all the students who have allowed me the honor of teaching them: the best way to learn a subject is to try to teach it. Indeed, my students have been my greatest teachers.



***Please Note!*** Before embarking on this practice, please make sure you are able to do so: check with your doctor or health care professional before starting any yoga practice. The guidance given in this book is not meant to replace medical advice and should be used only as a supplement if you are under the care of a health care professional. While care has been taken in compiling the guidance in this book, we cannot take any responsibility for any adverse effects from your practice of yoga. When you are not sure of any aspect of the practice, or feel unwell, seek medical advice. Please read the contraindications for each pose before you try the pose, so that you will know if this particular posture is a good one for you

to try. Be aware of the many options available to make each pose more accessible. Practice with both intention and attention.

## [Introduction](#)

Modern yoga has sprung from a figurative forest of many different styles of yoga with many varied intentions. In the earliest records of ancient India, yogis were mythical beings with powers that could transcend this physical realm. One particular tree germinating in this fertile forest about 1,000 years ago is called Hatha Yoga, which means the forceful yoga. Hatha Yoga, distinct from the other trees in the yoga forest, was primarily designed to strengthen the body and prepare it for other forms of yoga; these forms could be the meditative practices that lead to liberation and enlightenment but Hatha Yoga could also be a path towards developing darker arts and black magic. Many Hatha yogis were famed for their prowess as warriors and were hired as mercenaries.

Today, we mostly know of Hatha Yoga in the West as the practice that makes us healthier and calmer. Not too many practitioners of yoga today are aiming for spiritual awakening, although if that happens, that might be nice. The intentions for attending a yoga class today may range from seeking health to seeking companionship. The fact that you can actually take a yoga



class today is very new: there were no classes in ages past—you learned by sitting at the feet of your guru. If you were lucky, he would impart to you everything he learned from his guru, but this transmission would take many long years of dedicated study and practice.

The Hatha tree sprouted many stout branches. Far more than the physical postures, or asanas, the original practice emphasized the breath and magic circles formed by the hands and body, called mudras. In the last 100 years, asanas have moved into the spotlight in the evolving Western versions of Hatha Yoga. There are dozen of branches now: some of the oldest are called Ashtanga Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, and Sivananda Yoga while some of the newest and smallest shoots have names like aqua yoga, dance yoga and wine & chocolate yoga. Most of these modern forms of Hatha Yoga emphasize health and wellness physically, mentally and emotionally. With the modernization of Hatha Yoga, some things have been lost. The original forms of Hatha Yoga equally emphasized strong muscular activities, which can be characterized as yang practices, and the softer activities that opened our deeper tissues such as the joints, which can be characterized as the yin practices. The yin-side of yoga is found now only hidden inside a few softer styles such as restorative yoga and in the meditation practices, which very few people are drawn to. This is an

unfortunate omission because it robs the student of the chance to develop enhanced health for the whole body, heart and mind.

This book is an investigation into that missing half: Yin Yoga. The investigation will take you into the philosophical underpinnings of yin versus yang and will explain the benefits of adding a yin perspective to your yoga practice. These benefits are considerable and are found in all aspects of our life: from our physical well-being to our mental and emotional well-being.

The practice of Yin Yoga is explained here in detail, but a book is never a substitute for a teacher. If you are drawn to investigate this part of the Yoga forest further, you are encouraged to seek out a Yin Yoga teacher that you can relate to. Like all yoga practice, theory alone is insufficient: you must actually do the practice. It is entertaining and educational to read about how and why you might do Yin Yoga, but the real value comes in actually getting down on the floor. So. . .as you begin to read this book, get off your couch, get out of your chair, place a cushion on the floor and begin to read while sitting, or lying on the ground. Move around all you want, but stay on the floor for as long as you can. You are already beginning the practice.

## [CHAPTER ONE Yin Yoga Defined](#)

*Our goal in life is not to become perfect: our goal is to become whole.*

Modern yoga has its roots deep in Eastern mysticism, has been fertilized by nineteenth-century gymnastics and wrestling, and has been shaped by Western sensibilities. Today, yoga as practiced in the West is totally unique: this yoga has never existed anywhere else before—today we practice Western Yoga for the benefits that Westerners desire. These benefits are considerable and will be explored in this investigation. If you have been doing yoga for a while now, you might be experiencing only half of the practice and just some of the benefits that are available to you. Yin Yoga is the other half.

Most forms of yoga today are dynamic, active practices designed to work only half of our body, the muscular half, the “yang” tissues. Yin Yoga allows us to work the other half, the deeper “yin” tissues of our ligaments, joints, deep fascial networks, and even our bones. All of our tissues are important and need to be exercised so that we can achieve optimal health and vitality.

Exercise our joints?! Isn't that dangerous? Yes and no. It depends on how we do it; we can exercise our joints safely if we do so intelligently. If done incorrectly, we can definitely hurt ourselves, but we can say that about any form of exercise.

Saying that Yin Yoga is the other half, that it works the deeper tissues of

the body, is just the beginning of defining what Yin Yoga is all about. We need to look at the definitions of the underlying principles of yin and yoga



to look at the intention behind engaging in a yoga practice, and to explore the benefits and methodologies used in a Yin Yoga practice.

There are many reasons for beginning a yoga practice; obtaining optimum physical health is just one. Many people are drawn to yoga to help reduce the effects of stress in their lives. others wish to deepen their meditation practices or to simply become more present in their daily lives.

As we will discover, yoga in general and Yin Yoga in particular provides physical, mental, emotional, and energetic benefits and, for some, spiritual.

Which benefits you enjoy will depend greatly upon your intention when you practice.

How you practice is just as important as what you do in your practice.

There is a yin aspect to life and a yang aspect. There is a yin way to practice yoga and a yang way that go beyond the actual movements and postures employed in a yoga session. Yin is yielding, allowing, and nourishing. Even within an active, sweaty yang practice we can adopt a yin sensitivity that will help us gain much more from our yoga practice. Even within an active yang lifestyle, we can adopt a yin awareness and acceptance that will help

us gain contentment in our lives.

Yin Yoga can have the same goals and objectives as any other school of yoga. What we do will be different but *how* we do it will be the biggest difference. Why we do yoga really comes down to our own unique, particular intentions. Knowing the benefits of the Yin Yoga style will help you clarify intentions for your practice.

Some students initially find this style of yoga quite boring, passive, or soft, but they quickly discover that it can be quite challenging due to the long duration of the poses. Yin Yoga is simple, but simple does not mean easy. We can remain in the postures anywhere from one to twenty minutes! After you have experienced this, even just once, you will realize that you have been doing only half of the asana practice.

**Please Note!** Yin Yoga as described here is *not* restorative yoga. If the tissues you are targeting for exercise are damaged in some way, please give yourself a chance to heal before resuming your regular practice.



[Yin and Yang](#)

[Patterns define our](#) lives. Look around you right now and you

will notice the patterns surrounding you. Look up; you will see things that are high. Look down; you will see things that are low. Listen; you will hear things close by, and you will hear things far away. Bring your attention inward; you may feel the tip of your nose or the top of your head. Now you may be feeling the tips of your toes. Up, down ... near, far ... these are just some of the adjectives we can choose to describe the patterns of life, of existence. All patterns are formed by contrasts. The pattern on a chessboard is formed by the contrast of dark and light. The pattern of your life, when reflected upon, has displayed a contrast of good times and bad. For the Daoist, harmony and health are created when conditions arise where the contrasting aspects are in balance.

YIN

YANG

Dark

Light

Cold

Hot

Passive

Active

Inside

Outside

Solid

Hollow

Slow

Rapid

Dim

Bright

Downward

Upward

Substance

Function

Water

Fire

Matter

Energy

Mysterious

Obvious

Female

Male

Moon

Sun

Night

Day

Earth

Heaven

Even

Odd

Dragon

Tiger

Plastic

Elastic

Balancing is not a static act. Imagine the typical depiction of weighing scales: two plates held by a common string suspended at a point halfway between them. When two equally weighted objects are placed upon the scales, there is a slight swaying motion, like a pendulum. If one side is too heavy, the scales tip and balance is lost. When both sides are equal, there is still a slight oscillation around the middle position. This rebalancing is the return to wholeness and health.

The ancient Chinese called this middle that we return to the [Dao.1](#) The Dao is the tranquility found in the center of all events, and the path leading



to the center. The center is always there even if we are not always there to enjoy it. When we leave the center we take on aspects of yin or yang.

Yin and yang are relative terms: they describe the two facets of existence.

Like two sides of one coin, yin cannot exist without yang, nor yang without yin. They complement each other. Since existence is never static, what is yin and what is yang are always in flux, always changing.

The ancient Chinese observed that everything has yin or yang attributes.

The terms existed in Confucianism and in the earliest Daoist writings. The yin character refers to the shady side of a hill or stream. Yang refers to the sunny side. Shade cannot exist without light, and light can only be light when contrasted to darkness. And so we see how, even in the earliest uses of these terms, patterns are observed.

There is no absolute yin or absolute yang. A context is always required: in the context of light, darkness and brightness define yin and yang. In a number of other contexts, yin describes what is relatively denser, heavier, lower, more hidden, more yielding, more feminine, more mysterious, and more passive. Yang describes the opposite conditions: what is less dense, lighter, higher, more obvious or superficial, more masculine, and more dynamic. The table shows a more complete list of comparisons. There is no limit to the relative contexts in which yin and yang can be applied.

### *Yin Contains Yang*

Look again at the symbol for yin and yang at the beginning of this section.

Do you see the white dot within the dark paisley swirl? Even within the darkness of yin, there is a lightness of yang and vice versa. in the context of temperature we say that hotter is yang and cooler is yin; but hot water is yin compared to boiling water, which is yang. in the other direction, cold water is yang compared to ice, which is yin.

In our yoga practice there are very active asana workouts, which we may call yang, but even within these yang practices we can find yin aspects; watching our breath mindfully while we flow through a vigorous vinyasa<sup>2</sup> is just one example.

### *Yin Becomes Yang*

Just as we detect yin elements within the yang aspects, we can also notice how yin becomes yang, and yang can transform into yin. These transformations may be slow and subtle, or they may be devastatingly quick. The seasons roll slowly by, changing imperceptibly. The yang of spring and summer transforms day by day into the yin of fall and winter. it is not possible to pick the exact moment at which one season becomes another, astronomical observations notwithstanding. But the transformation may also come quickly: the eye of a hurricane quickly brings calm, and just

as quickly the eye moves on and the other half of the storm strikes.

In our own life we often experience both the slow and quick transformations of yin into yang and yang into yin. We wake up in the morning; yin becomes yang. Sometimes our awakening is slow, leisurely; this is a slow transformation. Sometimes we wake with a start and jump out of bed, perhaps because we overslept. When we work long hours for many weeks or months in a row (a very yang lifestyle), our body may seek balance by suddenly making us too sick to work (a very yin lifestyle), or it may gift us with a severe migraine to slow us down. Yang is quickly transformed into yin.

### *Yin Controls Yang*

In this last example, we can see that if we stay too long in an unbalanced situation, the universe acts to restore balance. It throws us to the other side: our health may suffer and our lives may change. If we do not heed the need for balancing yin and yang, this transition can be devastating. A heart attack could be the balancing force applied to us. These imbalances are often referred to as an excess or a deficiency. We can have an excess or a deficiency of either yin or yang. The cure is to apply the opposite energy to control the imbalance.

In the Eastern world of the yogis<sup>3</sup> of India and the alchemical Daoists of

China, the need for balance is well known and [understood.4](#) In the West, while we do not use the terms yin and yang, the need to pay attention and balance our opposing natures has been realized by many astute observers of our psychological landscape. Carl Jung recognized his dark side, which he termed “the shadow,” and discovered that if left unattended, these dark, repressed energies will wreak havoc in one’s life. The oppositions within create a dynamic tension that can lead to destruction or amazing creativity. For Jung, the way to work with these opposing energies is to integrate them, or [individuate5](#). He, and his followers after him, developed many tools to do this integration. Shadow work can include active imagining or creating rituals that honor both energies within us.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICAL

Losing

Winning

Outgo

Income

Fasting

Eating

Passivity

Action

Giving

Earning

Poverty

Possession

Repose

Activity

Celibacy

Sex

Observation

Decisiveness

Obedience

Freedom

Duty

Choice

Ecstasy

Sobriety

Vision

Focus

Less is more

More is better

Notice the differences and the similarities between the earlier table of yin and yang characteristics with the table on the previous page, taken from Robert Johnson's [s6](#) book *Owning Your Own Shadow*. Here, Johnson shows the many opposing values we are subjected to in Western cultures: [7](#) one set our religious or spiritual beliefs require of us, and the other set is what we need to survive and thrive in our secular life, the business world. Note the yin-like qualities and the opposing yang-like energies. How we reconcile the opposing energies of Sunday morning versus the rest of the week will lead either to a breakdown or a breakthrough; a revelation—which is only possible if we do the work required, if we do our yoga whether with Western or Eastern techniques.

In the West, true understanding of yin and yang is uncommon. We don't think in these terms; our lifestyles rarely reflect the need for balance. We seek it only when the universe forces us to pay attention, when we suffer the breakdown that avoiding our dark side creates. only then do we seek help to regain balance. only when we become exhausted or sick do we take time off. only when we injure our bodies do we slow down and look for gentler ways to exercise. We can be yang-like for only so long before crashing. We can be yin-like for only so long before stagnating. We need balance in all things.

## Yin Tissues and Yang Tissues

As mentioned, yin and yang are relative terms and need a context to be appropriately applied. They can be used as adjectives, although they are often used as nouns. Within our bodies, if we use the context of position or density, the yang tissues can be seen as our muscles, blood, and skin compared to the yin tissues of ligaments, bones, and joints. The contexts of flexibility or heat could also be used: muscles are elastic, but bones are plastic. [8](#) Muscles love to get warm, while ligaments generally remain cool. Yang styles of yoga generally target the muscles and employ rhythmic, repetitive movements to stress the fibers and cells of the muscles. Being elastic and moist, the muscles appreciate this form of exercise and respond well to it. Yin tissues, however, being dryer and much less elastic, could be damaged if they were stressed in this way. Instead, our more plastic tissues appreciate and require gentler pressures, applied for longer periods of time, in order to be stimulated to grow stronger. This is why orthodontic braces must be worn for a long time with a reasonable (but not always comfortable) amount of pressure, in order to reshape the bones of the jaw. Our joints can be seen simply as spaces between the bones where movement is possible. Stabilizing the joint are ligaments, muscles, and tendons, which bind the bones together. Generally, one of the muscles' jobs

is to protect the joint; if there is too much stress on the joint, the muscle will tear first, then the ligaments, and then finally the joint itself may become damaged. In this regard, yang yoga is designed to *not* stress the joint. This is why there is so much care taken to align the body and engage the muscles correctly before coming into asanas in the yang practice. However, Yin Yoga is specifically designed to exercise the ligaments and to regain space and strength in the joints.

An example can help explain the different roles of the muscles and ligaments. Place your right index finger in your left hand. Extend the finger and tighten the muscles and, with your left hand, try to bend the finger upwards. Notice that there is virtually no movement. The muscles' job is to bind the bones together and limit the range of motion allowed in the joint. Now relax the finger completely. Shake it out for a moment. Now, keeping the muscles passive, try to push the finger upwards. Notice the difference? The relaxed finger can move 90 degrees or more. When the muscles are relaxed the stress is moved to the ligaments binding the joint.

### *Stability and Mobility*

Remember the white dot within the paisley swirl of the yin and yang symbol? Within yang there is yin and vice versa; this also applies to our







tissues. Consider the muscle, which we just described as a yang tissue. Even here we will find yin within yang: 30 percent of what we call our muscle is actually fascia. As we will discover, it is the fascia within our muscles that govern the muscles' range of movement while it is our muscle cells that govern their strength. Yang yoga is great at developing the yang attribute of strength within our muscles but, surprisingly perhaps, it is the yin part of our practice, the holding of the pose, that provides length.

Within our yin tissues, we also find yang elements. In our fascia and ligaments, which are predominantly yin-like, there are contracting fibers, just like within our muscles. We also find elastic fibers called elastin within our yin tissues. So there is yang within yin here, too: our connective tissues can contract and shorten.

Physiologically, through our yoga practice, we build stability and mobility. If we look at the arc of aging, which everyone follows albeit at faster or slower rates, we begin life completely yang-like: we have the ultimate mobility that we will ever have, but we have no stability. Newborn babies have to be handled carefully because they have no internal stability. Now we start to stiffen, to become more yin-like. We gain stability as we age. When we are youngsters, we don't need to work on gaining more

mobility because we are already so yang-like: we need to work on our muscles and gaining strength. This is a yang time of life so we need yang forms of [exercise.9](#) Somewhere around our mid-twenties to mid-thirties we reach the optimal balance between yin and yang, between mobility and stability. But the arc of aging must be followed: we continue to become more yin-like as we age, until eventually we end up completely rigid, as rigor mortis sets into our dead bodies. As we get older, as we get more yin-like, we need a yin form of exercise to keep us mobile.

### [The Theory of Exercise](#)

All forms of exercise share two features in common:

first we must stress the tissues,  
then we must let the tissues rest.

Yang tissues do better when stressed in a yang manner and yin tissues do better when stressed in a yin way. Stress has many negative connotations in our culture because we forget the “rest” part of this equation. But to have no, or little, stress in our life is just as damaging as having too much stress.

We need to stress the body, and we need to rest it. There is a yin/yang balance here that leads to health. Too much of anything is not healthy.

Yang exercise targets the yang tissues: the muscles. Muscles love to be rhythmically and repetitively moved. Any static holds are [brief10](#). The

muscles are elastic and can take this type of exercise. However, to apply yang exercise to yin tissues could damage them. Yin tissues, being more plastic, require gentler but long-held stresses. imagine bending a credit card back and forth one hundred and eight times every morning, over and over again. it wouldn't take many mornings of this for it to snap in half. The credit card is plastic, just as our ligaments are. To rhythmically bend ligaments over and over again, as some students do when doing drop back from standing into the Wheel or moving from Up-dog to Down-dog, can, over time, damage the ligaments, just like the credit card was damaged. The warning here is ... **do not apply yang exercise techniques to yin tissues!**

Applying a yin exercise to yang tissues could also be damaging. Holding a muscle in a contracted state for a long period of time is called “tetany” [11](#) and may damage it.

Is it better to tighten muscles (yang) or relax them (yin)? That depends on your intention. We tighten our muscles to protect our joints. We relax our muscles so we can exercise our joints. What is your intention in the pose you are doing?

Many health care professionals shudder at the thought of exercising joints; they have the mistaken view that all exercise is yang exercise.

Despite this concern it is possible to exercise ligaments, bones, and joints in

a yin way. In fact, it is necessary.

However, because they are yin tissues we must exercise them in a yin way. And please remember the important second part of this equation—we must rest! [12](#) There is a lot of research proving the importance of stress and rest beyond just developing strength physically, but it is beyond the scope of this journey to go into it further. [13](#)

### *Stretch Versus Stress*

We need to define a couple of terms that are used rather loosely by many yoga teachers: stress and stretch. These are not synonyms. Technically, stress is the tension that we place upon our tissues, while stretch is the elongation that results from the stress. We often say we are stretching our muscles, but to be more precise, what we are doing is applying a stress to our muscles that results in a stretch. A stretch, however, does not always accompany a stress, so they are not the same thing. For example, in isometric exercises we stress the muscles, but there is no change in the length of the muscles.

We can stress ligaments too, especially in Yin Yoga, but because the ligaments are more plastic and less elastic than muscles, that stress is less likely to result in a stretch. There may be some small stretch to a ligament; however, generally the tendons and ligaments should not stretch more than

4–10 percent or we risk damaging [them.14](#) We are *not* trying to stretch our ligaments or joint capsules with Yin Yoga. We *are* trying to stress them.

Over time, the tissues may become longer, thicker, and stronger, but in any one Yin Yoga session, we are not trying to lengthen these particular tissues.

Said another way, in Yin Yoga, the key is the stress not the stretch.

When we use the term *stretch* in this book, we will either refer to a lengthening of the tissues (for example, we will stretch a muscle to make it longer) or we will use it to indicate that the intention of the applied stress is to lengthen the tissues, even if no lengthening actually occurs. If we are not intending to lengthen the tissues, which is mostly the case in Yin Yoga, we will not use the term *stretch*, but will stick to the term *stress*.

### [Original Yin](#)

A seal discovered during the excavation of Mohenjo-Daro, one of the largest cities of the ancient Harappan civilization, which flourished over 4,000 years ago, depicts a yogi sitting in a meditative posture—and a Yin Yoga posture at that.

Hatha Yoga, the most common form of yoga practiced today in the West, is a physical practice. The intention of Hatha Yoga, which blossomed around the tenth century C.E., was to prepare the body for the more advanced yoga practices of meditation and insight. Hatha Yoga arose out of

the earlier Tantra Yoga style, which in turn drew from the Classical Yoga of around 2,000 years ago.

There has never been one yoga from which all other yogas have evolved.

There is no yoga-tree that one can create to show the inter-relationships between all the various forms and expressions of yoga over the millennia.

Rather, we would need to draw a forest of yoga trees to really understand yoga's full and varied history. We do know that Hatha Yoga as a specific practice is not itself thousands of years old, but Hatha Yoga does have roots that go back that far. It is known that ancient yogas from many lineages incorporated some basic physical practices, such as sitting in meditation, as shown in the seal mentioned above.

Sitting for long periods of time is a yin form of exercise. If you have ever tried to sit for even one hour at a time, you know this is not easy. To sit for hours upon hours every day requires special training of the body and the mind; the back muscles need to be strong, the posture needs to be correct, the hips need to be open, and the mind needs to be focused. While there are no extant texts from 2,000 years ago or earlier that describe how these ancient meditators prepared their bodies for these exertions, we can safely assume that they did prepare their bodies in some way. One of the best ways to prepare you for a specific yoga pose is to do that specific pose! One way

to best prepare ourselves to sit, is to sit. Sitting, quietly for a long period of time, is a yin practice. We can speculate that most, if not all, of the earliest asana practices were yin-like in nature. However, it did not stay that way. There are just a few texts that have survived the centuries that describe the way Hatha Yoga was taught in the tenth to eighteenth centuries: the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Gheranda Samhita, the Shiva Samhita, and a few others. However, none of these ancient texts were meant to be read alone. They all required the guidance of a guru to ensure understanding. The books were used more like notes—shorthand reminders of the real teaching. Much of the real knowledge was deliberately kept hidden; only when the teacher felt the student was ready was the knowledge revealed. We cannot tell simply from reading these old texts how the physical practice of yoga was performed. What we can say, as mentioned earlier, is that the purpose of the physical practice was to prepare the student for the deeper practices of meditation.

In the earliest spiritual books of India, the Vedas, yoga is not described as a path to liberation, and asana practice is not described at all. Rather, *yoga*, among its many other meanings, meant discipline, and the closest word to *asana* was *asundi*, which described a block upon which one sat in order to meditate. By the time the Yoga Sutra was [compiled,15](#) yoga was defined as

a psycho-spiritual practice aimed at ultimate liberation. Asana, however, was still a very minor aspect of the practice. The Yoga Sutra mentions asana only twice<sup>16</sup> in all one hundred and ninety-six aphorisms. And all that is said about asana is that it should be *sthira* and *sukham*: steady and comfortable. These are very much yin qualities, compared to the style of asana we see performed today in yoga classes. When we are still and the mind undistracted by bodily sensation, meditation can arise.

The point of yoga practices is to enter into a meditative state from which realization or liberation may arise. Different schools of yoga have different techniques for achieving this. Some even claim that one cannot become liberated while in the body. The goal in these early dualistic schools is to get out of the body as fast as possible, but this must be done in the right way. Other schools rejected that approach and suggested, since we can only meditate and practice yoga while in the body, we must treat the body well.

The body must be healthy. The focus of the Hatha Yoga schools was to build a strong, healthy body that would allow the yogi to meditate for many hours each day. In Hatha Yoga, the practice of asana began to take on a new, broader importance. However, the ultimate goal was still to be able to sit comfortably and steadily for hours.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika was written around 1350 C.E. by Swami



Swatmarama<sup>17</sup>. It is almost twice as long as the Yoga Sutra and has generated a lot of commentary since its writing. It is one of the oldest extant documents we have describing Hatha Yoga. Compared to today's practices, however, it too has very little asana practice in it. There are only fifteen asanas listed, and of these, eight are seated postures<sup>18</sup>. These are quite yin-like in their nature; however, many of the other postures are definitely yang-like. The peacock ( *mayurasana*) is prescribed, and if you have seen this posture performed, there is nothing relaxing or yin-like about it. We are told that one of the fifteen postures is supreme; once one has mastered *siddhasana*, all the other postures are useless. <sup>19</sup> Siddhasana is a simple, yin-like seated posture.

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika claims that Lord Shiva taught the Hatha Yoga sage Matsyendra eighty-four asanas. <sup>20</sup> Other myths claim there are eighty-four thousand or even eight hundred and forty thousand asanas. Regardless, only fifteen are listed in the Pradipika. And of asanas it is said that these should be practiced to gain steady posture, health, and lightness of the body.<sup>21</sup> Not mentioned in any of the Hatha texts is how long one should hold the pose. This is where the guru's guidance is necessary. However, one can assume that the seated postures were meant to be held a long time while the more vigorous poses like the peacock were held for briefer periods. It is in the seated postures that the *vayus* (the winds or the breath) become

trained through *pranayama*. The Lotus Pose ( *padmasana*) is the prescribed [pose for conducting pranayama.22](#)

As time went on, later texts expanded the number of asanas explained.

The Gheranda Samhita, written perhaps in the late 1600s, [23](#) a few hundred years after the Pradipika, describes thirty-two asanas, of which one-third could be said to be yin-like and the others more yang-like. A trend had begun: more yang asanas than yin asanas. A few decades later, the Shiva Samhita listed eighty-four asanas. By the time of the British Raj, when England began to colonize indian culture and change the school system, asanas were beginning to become blended with forms from the gymnasiums. Wrestling, gymnastics, and other exercises were cross-fertilizing the asana practice. By the end of the nineteenth century there were thousands of asanas. [Krishnamacharya24](#) said he knew around three thousand postures but that his guru, Ramamohan Brahmachari, knew eight thousand. The era of yang yoga was upon us.

This gradual, and then sudden, evolution of asana practice moved it away from the original yin style of holding seated poses for a long time as a preparation for the deeper practice of meditation to the more active yang style of building strength and health. it is not that the more yin-like poses disappeared: B.K.S. iyengar, in his *Light on Yoga*, suggests that the pose

Supta [Virasana](#)<sup>25</sup> should be held for ten to fifteen minutes. That is Yin Yoga, he just never used that terminology.<sup>26</sup> Theos Bernard, a very popular Hatha Yoga teacher in the mid-twentieth century, also recommended long holds of various postures. The problem arose that, despite yin-like poses remaining in the lexicon of asanas, they were marginalized in favor of the more yang-like postures. One is not better than the other; they are simply different. To sit for long periods of time in deep, undisturbed meditation requires a body that is open and strong. This opening, especially in the hips and lower back, is developed through a dedicated yin practice. However, there is certainly nothing wrong with working the heart and making our muscles longer and stronger, too.

The original styles of physical yoga were very yin-like in nature. Over the past two hundred years the style has changed to be more yang-like. As in all things in life, harmony comes through balance. By combining both styles, progress in practice is more assured. But, why do we call this “Yin” yoga? *Yin* is not an Indian term, it is a Chinese word. Where did this crossover come from? Let’s look at the parallel development of physical yoga from a Chinese, or Daoist, perspective.

### [Daoist Yoga](#)

Ten thousand years ago throughout all cultures, shamans blazed the spiritual

paths. In India the shamanic traditions evolved into the yogic practices and philosophies we have been investigating. But this evolution was not confined to the valleys of the Indus, Saraswati (now gone), and Ganges rivers. In Europe (especially in Greece), the Middle East, and China, the same discoveries were being made. Over centuries, despite the distance and difficulty of travel, knowledge filtered out and was shared between cultures. It is not surprising that we find similar concepts discussed in the spiritual practices and philosophies of each region. However, the models and metaphors were modified to fit the local cultural landscape.

The concept of spirit (breath) in the European world had its counterpart in prana (breath) in India. In China the same energy was known as *Chi*. Chi is just one of several concepts central to Chinese medical practices. These concepts evolved out of native spiritual practices grouped together under the name Daoism. [27](#)

There are many forms of Daoism and many ways to practice the teachings. The Dao is sometimes personalized as a god, but most often it is impersonalized as a benevolent but disinterested power: the way of the universe. Live in harmony with the way and you will benefit. Struggle against the way things are and you will suffer.

Most Westerners know of the Dao through the book by Lao-tzu called the

*Dao De Ching: The Way of Virtue*[28](#) In the *Dao De Ching* we are taught that the Dao is the source of everything. it is nameless because whenever you try to capture the essence of the universe in a concept, you miss the totality of what you are trying to name. The Dao is infinite and inexhaustible. Only the Dao is unchanging and unchangeable.

Since everything is part of the Dao, it follows that the earth, sky, rivers, mountains, stars, and humans are also part of the Dao. Man is not outside of all this but part of it. [29](#) in the *Dao De Ching* the message is: Get involved! Help, but help in a non-intrusive way. When finished, retire. Yang is acting. Yin is retiring. The Dao is the balance between the two.

In the Daoism of Lao-tzu, the sage is one who cultivates life. The sage learns physical techniques to do this: he regulates his breath, he hones his body, he garners health, and he manages his internal energies including the important sexual energy. Along with the physical techniques, the sage also follows ethical principles and regulates his own mind through meditation. Diet is also an important part of building and maintaining health. Through all these practices, the sage seeks to change his body and mind to recover youth and vitality and live in peace.

### *The Five Major Systems*

There are five main systems in Daoism. These are sometimes contradictory

and confusing, especially to people of different cultures. Many of the practices of one system are used in the other systems. Thus, the lines between these systems are not fixed and final. The five systems are:

1. **Magical Daoism:** the oldest form of Daoism still practiced today. in this practice, the powers of the elements of nature and spirits are invoked and channeled through the practitioner to gain health, wealth, and progeny.

2. **Divinational Daoism:** based on understanding the way of the universe and seeing the great patterns of life. Knowing how the universe works allows us to live in harmony with those universal forces. As in heaven, so on earth. Divinational Daoism utilizes the study of the stars and patterns found on earth to help us live harmoniously. The *I-Ching* (the book of changes) is a divinational book.

3. **Ceremonial Daoism:** Daoism was originally a spiritual practice. Unlike yoga, which remained a personal spiritual practice, this branch of Daoism evolved into a religion.

4. **Action and Karma Daoism:** Proper action leads to accumulating merit. Following the introduction of Buddhism into China, ethics took on a greater role in spiritual practice. But it did not start there; Confucius also taught the value of proper behaviour and morality.

Good deeds result in rewards, both in this life and the next.

**5. Internal Alchemy Daoism:** Immortality is the goal of this practice.

The seeker works to change his mind and body to achieve health and longevity. It was in this practice that Chi became recognized as the key to health and long life. Chi is gathered, nurtured, and circulated through very strict practices. Incorrect practice is dangerous, and this path of Daoism required an expert teacher. It is mostly from this system that Chinese medicine evolved.

While an investigation of all these forms of Daoism is beyond the scope of this book, we can look in more detail at the really interesting branch—

[Alchemical Daoism. 30](#)

### *Alchemical Daoism*

The Indian yogis were seeking spiritual immortality: liberation from the endless cycles of death and rebirth. The Daoist yogis, who practiced alchemical Daoism, were seeking physical immortality: they simply wanted to live forever in this body. The form of alchemy we are talking about is not the transformation of base materials to gold, but the transformation of the normal body to a perfect body. Changing lead to gold is a metaphor for the real goal. There was a period where external alchemy was tried, which involved a lot of poisonous substances like mercury, but after hundreds of

years of simply poisoning the seeker to death, this form of alchemy was dropped in favor of an internal method—to change from within.

To become physically immortal, one needed to become really healthy, and that required a lot of dedication and hard work. It could be done! Or at least, it was known that a few amazing individuals had achieved immortality, but these Daoist immortals were not easy to find and we can assume they are mythological beings, not living humans whom we can email and ask how they did it. And, to be sure, there are many who believe that the real immortality that alchemical Daoists seek is spiritual immortality, once this mortal coil has been shed. In either case, spiritual immortality or physical immortality, the practice of the internal alchemical Daoists is every bit as challenging as the Indian yoga practices.

The first priority of an internal alchemist is to conserve his energies.

When we are born, we are given a certain amount of three main kinds of energy: generative energy (called *Jing*), which feeds our sexual desires, vital energy (the commonly known Chi energy), and spirit energy (called *Shen*). While these energies are filling us up as we grow in our mother's womb, the mind and the body are already starting to separate. When we are born, out of our ignorance we begin to dissipate our three main energies. We lose our generative energy any time we even think about sex. Our Chi



leaks out through our emotions, and our Shen is lost when our thoughts flow. These leakages are what weaken us, cause illness, and lead ultimately to our death. [31](#) Through alchemical practice, through internal transformation, our original stores of energy can be rebuilt and we can regain health and longevity.

Alchemical Daoism focuses on the stimulation and balancing of energy in both its yin and yang aspects. The yin energy is the dragon: the yang energy is the tiger. To unify yin and yang we must remove all blockages that exist throughout the body so that these energies can unite in the three cauldrons, called the [tan-t'iens](#).[32](#) The process to stimulate these energies involves our breath. Fast breathing will direct yang fire to the middle and upper cauldrons, while slower and softer breathing will stimulate yin energy to incubate our internal energies.

Transformation also involves physical and mental exercises to change our skeletal structures and our mental formations. Before working on the mental changes, one must master the physical changes. Tools here include a host of exercises designed to hone the body: tendon-changing practices, massage, martial arts, and the more widely known t'ai chi ch'uan and ch'ikung practices. once this basic training is successful, the alchemist moves on to transform his internal energy. Refining and transforming

generative energy, which is stored in the kidneys, into vital energy involves work in the abdomen area, physically, as well as mental practices to minimize sexual desires. Care now must be taken not to dissipate our vital energy through negative emotions, such as anger, fear, frustration, or sadness. Now the alchemist is ready for the final stage: transforming vital energy into spirit energy. For this, meditation is required. The mind must become empty of thoughts, and all signs of duality extinguished. There is no longer a subject and an object: no thinker and no thought.

When the alchemist is sufficiently advanced, he is ready to begin to circulate his energy through a practice known as the microcosmic orbit. [33](#) He will not be successful if he has not first cleared out all the blockages to the flow of energy or if his mind or senses are stimulated. In the 1930s, Richard Wilhelm[34](#) described the benefit of the circling of light in his translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower, a Chinese Book of Life*. This ancient text was transmitted orally for centuries before being written down in the eighth century. Wilhelm, a friend of Carl Jung's, wrote:

If the life forces flow downward, that is, without let or hindrance into the outer world, the anima is victorious over the animus; no “spirit body” or “Golden Flower” is developed, and, at death, the ego is lost. If the life forces are led through the “backward-flowing” process, that is,