

Namaste: Yoga in Solitary

John Jay Powers spent a total of 25 years in solitary confinement. Originally arrested and jailed for bank robbery in 1989, Powers made a nonviolent escape attempt at a time when he feared that his life was in danger in prison. He was subsequently sent to the federal supermax facility known as ADX Florence in Colorado, where he spent 12 years in extreme isolation and was driven to several desperate acts of self-harm. He was finally transferred, along with several other men, following a legal challenge to the practice of holding people with mental health issues at ADX. Powers is currently incarcerated at USP Florence, the maximum security facility located in the same complex.

In a recent telephone interview with Solitary Watch, Powers described the role that yoga has played in his life during his incarceration. He first learned about yoga while being held at USP Lewisburg in Pennsylvania. "It's a really old prison, probably well over 100 years old now," he said, "and I was being held in the basement...in a single solitary cell. And another guy had a book that he didn't want, so he gave it to me." It turned out to be a book on sports yoga, and it interested Powers enough that when he had the opportunity, he continued to read and learn as much as he could. Powers said that yoga would later save his life on numerous occasions. He remembers times at ADX when he was "wallowing in a type of despair that would have been hard to come out of" if he didn't have yoga to help him survive. He still practices every day. What follows are excerpts from the guidebook written and illustrated by Powers, intended especially for people in prison, called Yoga in 7 Easy Lessons. —Valerie Kiebala

By John Jay Powers

The word "Namaste" is from the Sanskrit language and means "I recognize the great goodness in you."

Yoga is not a religion. It can facilitate spiritual beliefs and practices, but in and of itself is nothing more than a discipline. Yoga is easy to learn, and its main purpose is to coordinate (and thereby improve) the functions of the body and mind. Yoga is a set of specialized exercises that strengthen a person's mental and physical capabilities. There is nothing mysterious about it.

Yoga is many things. It is a philosophy, a way of life, a discipline, a perspective, an exercise, and a set of values. Among the many components of yoga is the continuity of positions. This can be called a sequence of positions (vinyasa), and it lends a sense of individuality to each practitioner of yoga.

Although the sequence of positions is a matter of individual choice, there are certain guidelines that should be followed. For example, a position that involves a forward bend should be followed by a position that involves a backward bend. The primary goal is to balance components.

The main goal is to achieve a higher state of consciousness, awareness and understanding so that the practitioner can enjoy a better life and become a better human being (Samadhi).

Most people go about their daily lives under the spell of incomplete understanding (avidya). But there is the possibility of developing a clear and proper understanding (vidya), which is a more substantial understanding that leads to overall peace of mind.

These lessons involve what is called "royal yoga" (raja yoga). There are three primary parts of this yoga: diaphragmatic breathing with ujjayi and mula banda (pranayama), practice of positions (hatha), and meditation (dhyana).

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Proper diaphragmatic breathing is the cornerstone of yoga, and this is why it is the most important thing of all to learn.

In the human anatomy, the diaphragm is a thin sheet of muscle that separates the abdominal cavity from the chest cavity. It is located at about the bottom of the sternum and runs horizontal across the torso.

When the abdomen (the belly) goes outward, the diaphragm is pulled down and the lungs fill with air. When the abdomen is contracted and pulled inward, the diaphragm is pushed up and the lungs empty out the air.

Use your belly to breathe, and breathe through your nose. When inhaling, let your belly relax and bow outward (You can even push it out a little bit). When you begin to exhale, tighten the muscles in your belly and pull your belly inward to force the air out of your lungs.

Over the next two or three days, stop whatever you are doing several times each day and practice this breathing. Take ten breaths each time and count them on the exhale.

Practice of Positions

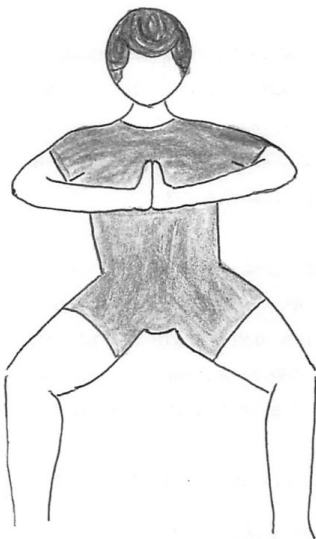
When performing each pose in the following sequence, be sure to implement the diaphragmatic breathing method, aiming to achieve ten full breaths in each pose: not too fast and not too slow!

The positions in yoga are called "asanas" and they have purposes other than stretching. In fact, stretching is probably the least important part of

yoga training. One of the most important

purposes of yoga is to gradually remove whatever keeps the life force energy (prana) from flowing freely throughout the body and mind of the practitioner ("yogi" for men; "yogini" for women).

Remember: Each lesson should be practiced at least ten times before moving on to the next lesson. There are good reasons for this kind of self-discipline.



1. Mountain Pose (Tadasana)

This standing position is very easy to perform but it is essential to any yoga practice.

Stand with your feet more than shoulder width apart, and be sure to bend your knees and lower yourself into a solid stance. Put your hands together over the center of your chest (mudra) and keep your back straight. Get a nice ten full breaths right here.

One thing to begin now is a kind of breath control at your throat (ujjayi). When you exhale, tighten the throat and make it a little bit harder for the air to pass. It should make a slight sound like "AHHH."

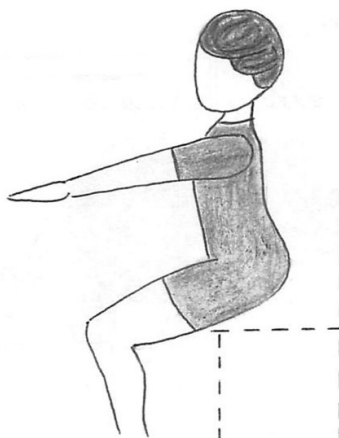
2. Front Forward Bend (Uttanasana)



In this position you bend over, place your hands on the front of your legs and stretch the back and the hamstrings. At first, this position will usually be a bit tight. Remember to go easy!

Your backbone will be stretched out, and the back of your legs will become flexible. It is important to relax and breathe into the position - and not to try to go too far too fast! Get ten full breaths. Whatever you do, do not bounce up and down!

3. Chair Pose (Ukatasana)

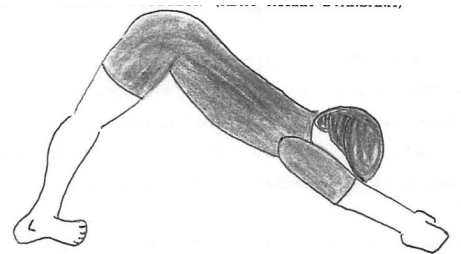


In this position you have your legs together and squat down as if you are going to sit in a chair. Your hands are either out in front of you, raised in the air slightly forward, or on your hips (if you cannot hold your arms out).

Once again, when you strike the correct position, do not move around. You must keep the body still in the position. And then get your ten full breaths from this position.

This position does strengthen the hip and knee joints, the thigh muscles, and the ankles. It tends to gather and focus attention, concentration and balance. The weight is kept mostly on the heels and the leg muscles are contracted. The feet should be pointing straight ahead.

4. Downward Dog (Adho Muka Savsana)



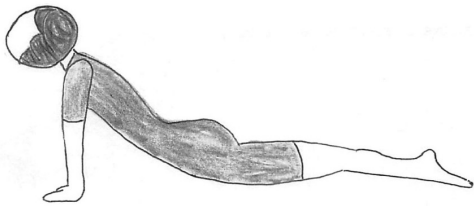
You can begin on your hands and knees and lift your tailbone into the air. Your arms are left straight out in front of you with the weight mostly on your palms.

This position is commonly known as "downward-facing dog." (It and "upward-facing dog" are probably the best known of all yoga positions). If the weight on the hands and wrists is too much, you can begin the position on your elbows and keep your knees slightly bent. The main focus is keeping your head below your waist.

You will probably want to begin with five breaths on this position and work your way up to ten during your preliminary practices.

Eventually you will be able to keep your arms and legs straight and master this position. Like anything else, you will get better at it with practice.

5. Upward Dog (Urdha Mukha Svanasana)

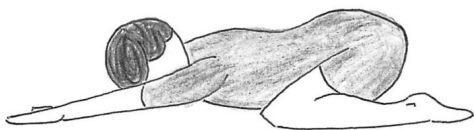


Keep your hands and feet planted and lower your pelvis area to the floor. Your feet, legs and hips should all be in contact with the floor, muscles contracted (particularly the buttocks). Your upper body should be held up by your arms and your back should be bent. Your head should be bent back, and you should be looking up at the ceiling.

Again, you can tell that this is a contraction because a lot of your muscles are flexed or tightened. The intra-abdominal pressure is increased, which squeezes internal organs and glands. Remember that once you get set in a position, do not move!

Now get your five breaths, making the "AHHH" or "HAAA" sound in your throat and locking the perineum muscles on the exhale. (Note: If you feel dizzy, it is usually a sign that you need to drink more water in the hours prior to practice.)

6. Child's Pose (Balasana)



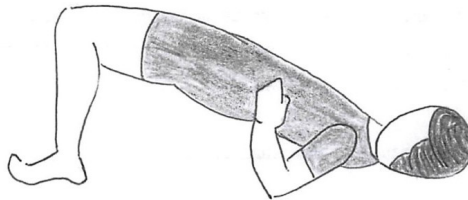
You will move directly from the previous position by moving your buttocks down toward your heels. Your arms are stretched out in front of you, and your forehead is resting on the floor. Your body weight is mostly on your knees.

This is a peaceful and relaxing position. It calms the central nervous system and balances the life force energy throughout the body.

Your sequence of positions may very well change over time as you develop

your personal practice. You will need to experiment in order to see how certain positions feel to you and how they fit together in your sequence. (Note: You can begin a sequence with any position, really.)

7. Bridge Pose (Setu Banda Sarvangasana)

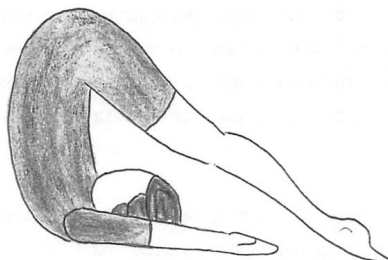


For this position, you begin by lying flat on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat to the floor beneath them, hands pressed against the floor at your side. And now you simply lift your waist up as high as you can and hold right there.

The weight is on your feet and shoulders. (Never put the weight on your neck or head in this position.) If you have trouble holding a firm position, you can use your hands to help support your weight by placing them on your waist.

Again, you are likely going to perform better by beginning with five breath repetitions. It will be relatively easy, however, to work your way up to the full ten breath repetitions you want. Remember that yoga is not a race; it is all about using simple techniques in combination and getting these right by way of practice.

So, once you have secured a stable position, go ahead and get your ten breaths in.



8. Halasana (Plow Pose)

For this position, you begin by lying on your back with your hands pressing against the floor at your side. Then you sort of lift your legs and hips and swing them up and over your head. (Note: Your legs may hang in the air or your feet may touch the floor. In the beginning, your knees will be bent to relieve pressure.)

You want to be careful with this position that you do not place too much pressure on your head and neck or lower back. This position is a tough one, but it is not so tough that you cannot master it. Just go easy!

Once you secure your position, try not to move. The idea is to relax into it and engage the diaphragmatic breathing. Go ahead and get your ten breaths and then roll back out of the position nice and easy.

Meditation

Yoga is meditation (dhyana). The basics of meditation involve techniques for keeping the body still and the mind quiet. There are many forms of meditation, but all of them seek to bring about an altered state of mind.

The main idea is to focus your mental attention on the breath itself as it travels in and out of your body. Keep the inhale about the same length as the exhale so that you get a good balance. (Note: Be sure to exhale fully so that you expel the air in the very bottom of your lungs).

You are not trying to think of anything at all. You want your mind to be blank because this is the action that is going to expand your consciousness. When you are able to maintain a relatively blank mind for more than ten breaths, you will be ready to add more. The goal is to slowly work your way up to 50 or 100 breaths. You will be able to accomplish this by adding five or ten breaths at a time. (Warning: You will need to maintain proper breathing and clarity of mind for at least five consecutive practices before being eligible to increase the number.)

The cleansing and purification of all physical systems and mental channels is the main goal of yoga: nothing more, and nothing less.

Meditation in Solitary

Jeremy Ahba Guidry is incarcerated in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. He reports having spent more than seven years in solitary confinement, in stretches ranging from 90 days to three years, mostly for nonviolent rule violations such as "having clothes out on my bed, 'stealing' food out of the kitchen, [and] having cigarettes in unauthorized areas of the prison."

Guidry has received 12 years of Siddha Yoga guidance from the Prison Project of the SYDA Foundation (PO Box 99140, Emeryville, CA 94662) and received the Buddhist name used below. At LSP, he organized a volunteer Buddhist meditation program that grew from nine incarcerated participants to 60. According to Guidry, prison officials terminated the program in 2018 without providing him a clear reason. Guidry continues to practice Buddhist meditation and has written a meditation guide for our readers. In a letter, he compared the practice of meditation to the practice needed to become a professional boxer. "We have a saying in the boxing world: Never back down. Never give up. Never quit. If you apply this to your meditation practice, you shall find whatever it is you're seeking." —Valerie Kiebala

By Abhajita Maitreya Prakashananda

If you're looking for God, you're in luck! God is EVERYwhere and in EVERYthing; and EVERYwhere and in EVERYthing that IS/NOT! Just keep looking...However, if you're looking only in a temple, a monastery, a church, a mosque, an ashram, etc., you may find yourself disappointed at each and every stop.

The correct teaching you'll find will consist of looking for God wherever you are, regardless of where that might be, even in your own home, or in a tree! God is there. Just keep looking. Don't give up... Remember: sit up!

Find a way to sit so that you can balance all your body weight on the base of your spine: the tailbone. Breathe. Balance. Relax. Breathe. Let all your thoughts come back to breathing. Concentrate.

A thought comes. See it. Let it go. Return the mind to the breath. Balance. Relax. Breathe. Stop the mind from thinking and read that which is between thoughts. There you will find God. Watch the breath. Witness the breath. Peacefully abide in the breath.

Your mind will drift. There may be times you feel you simply cannot sit still. It's okay. Be patient. Do not fret. Get up. Stretch. Slowly walk around. Stay mindful of the breath. Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. With each step, focus the mind on one thing: breathing.

When you feel like sitting back down, remember: balance the whole body on the tailbone: relax and breathe. Focus.

Breathe. Focus. Breathe. Always return to the breath. No use in trying to breathe a particular way. Simply watch the breath come and go as it pleases.

Be the seer and not the seen. Quiet the chattering thoughts that disturb your focus and bring the mind back to witnessing the breath enter the body of its own accord, then exit the body all on its own. Follow the breath. Allow the body to relax and balance itself as you sit quietly upon the tailbone. Breathe.

At some point, you may get agitated and/or fidgety. Stay calm and relax. This will pass with patience. You may come to a stage where you're totally relaxed and feeling fine and start getting very bored. Good! When you reach the boredom stage, you will find that breaking through it will take all the focus and concentration you can muster to get past it. Stay with the breath.

If you persevere, you shall discover a state of being we call "shamatha" or "peaceful abiding." There, you will find God. As if God could get "lost," eh? And it gets even better! The more you maintain in this state of being, the more you'll want to because the experience of shamatha is only the beginning. There's more.

However, with such knowledge comes great responsibility. You must PRACTICE diligently if you wish to experience the joy and contentment of which I explain here. Be patient with yourself and cease expectations. Do not anticipate what you think might happen next; simply stay focused on the breath, relax, and balance, and everything will fall in place just as it's meant

to. No amount of effort is ever wasted. Practice unfolds differently for everyone. We all have our own paths to find and follow – even if we are all on the same map. The Way is originally perfect and all pervading.

"If you want to respect yourself, if you want to improve yourself, if you want to experience the joy of your own inner Self, you can do that anywhere, even in prison." —Swami Muktananda

Reading about meditative techniques will help you analyze and understand the purpose for such knowledge. However, all the intellectualizing in the world can only give you someone ELSE'S version of their experience in how that method or technique worked for them. You may find similarities in these explanations, which is good, but until you've had your own experience, nothing anyone can say will truly define the extent and degree of the exact experience you'll undergo as you work through the stages these teachers tell you about.

As for my own personal experience with meditation, I must say, it saved my sanity as I dealt with years of harsh and inhumane conditions in solitary confinement.

Having witnessed the results of solitary firsthand, I can honestly say that the effort one puts into meditation may not only save your sanity, it could very well save your life...

For information on mindfulness meditation while in solitary confinement, write to: Mindfulness Peace Project, 6800 79th Street, Suite 200, Niwot, CO 80503