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TOPIC OF THE MONTH

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2nd Series of Ashtanga Yoga Nadi Shodhana

Since I just got back from a 2nd series adjustment clinic and we have been practicing 2nd series regularly here I thought I would take this month to talk about 2nd series; demystify it, how to know when you are ready for it, how to work into it, what are the poses, and what are their benefits.

The second series of Ashtanga yoga is known as the Intermediate series, or Nadi Shodhana which means “nerve purification”. In Ashtanga yoga there are three main systems of asana, Primary Series, Intermediate Series, and the Advanced series. Primary (yoga chikitsa) series is where we detoxify and align our body and minds, it is known as yoga therapy—we also learn to establish a regular practice and build the strength and fortitude necessary to carry us through a lifelong practice. The 2nd or intermediate series is where we begin the work on our nervous system, the electrical wiring so to speak of our body—getting rid of static and interference and opening up pathways (or nerve fibers) within our body for our energy (motor neurons) to flow easier. Third series is where we add strength and energy to our bodies, minds, and practice. (There are actually 5 (6 in the new way) series to Ashtanga Yoga, the fourth series slows down and mixes challenging poses with easier meditative poses, and the final series is the Rishi Series (which means one who knows), at this point you should have been practicing Ashtanga yoga for 20–30 years and are in your 60s, in the rishi series you choose 10 poses that you need for that day (headstand is always one of them) and hold each one for 50 breaths.

A friend of mine explained the three series to me as relative to a car:

Primary is doing the body work, making sure you have doors, wheels, etc. It is basically the structural stuff. This is why it has so many forward bends; you can start to feel the Bandhas and get some connection with the legs. Second series is like doing the electrical work, and it is about opening the heart (which is why some of us end up being pissed off – not so easy to open...). And Third, is like giving it (the car) gas. You do not want to accelerate a car that has structural issues or electrical issues because it will fall apart under the pressure, but if those are resolved, then you can give it some energy (most people say they gain energy doing Third).



DO NOT BE AFRAID of second series (be more afraid of staying in primary too long!), second series is not an advancement of primary, it is a counter balance to primary! It is very important to balance the forward bending of primary series with backward bending, Spending years in Primary before moving on to 2nd sets you up for lower back and knee pain, your lower back is always getting stretched out by all the forward bending without enough strengthening to compensate; your hips don't get opened enough to really keep the knees safe. Learning the early part of 2nd series (at least up through ustrasana) will help to balance you out.

What about upward dog? In primary you are doing upward dog many times . . . Upward dog is a gravity assisted backbend, it does not strengthen your back -- meaning you put your body in position and you do not have to do anything, gravity will make your back fall into a backbend (of course this is not desirable). When you do upward dog correctly you do a posterior tilt of your pelvis which reduces the back bend in the lumbar spine . . .

Overcoming Fear

Traditionally it is said that backward bending conquers fear, while forward bending conquers the ego. Second series begins with several back bending postures; we back bend while lying prone (strengthening the back muscles), while kneeling (deepening our back bends), and finally when sitting (lengthening our spine).

Back bending:

-  stretches out the front of the body
-  strengthens the back of the body



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ॐ improves the thoracic cavity by giving the lung/heart system space to expand and contract as we breathe—giving our ribs some mobility, allowing us deeper breath with less resistance.

These back bending postures also correct slumped posture, counterbalance our everyday position of sitting over a computer or steering wheel, help us stand up tall and confident, and literally open our heart area. The stretching and opening of the front of the body is a bit scarier than opening up the back of our body (as we did in Primary), we store more vulnerabilities in the front of our bodies.

After back bending we do a counter balance for the spine (bakasana -- a mini forward bend) and 2 twisting postures neutralizing our spine, preparing our body to go from deep back bending to deep forward bending.

In the second half of second we work to put our legs behind our head, we do this seated, lying supine, and standing while bending forward! This deep forward bending is the other half of the nerve cleansing -- back bending stretches and opens the front of your spine cleaning and bringing in fresh nutrients with more blood flow, placing your legs behind your head invigorates and stretches the back of your spine giving it a deep stretch allowing good blood flow around the vertebrae from the back.

ॐ Placing your leg behind your head strengthens the abdominals and increases blood supply to your heart and lungs,

ॐ on an emotional level placing your leg behind your head increases humility and decreases pride.

We then move on to a few arm balancing postures working on detoxing our internal organs and increasing strength and confidence, then a few calming postures, and then 7 headstands!

We close second series with more back bending, after Urdhva Dhanurasana we stand up on the third one (well we try to anyway), and work to drop back into Urdhva Dhanurasana from standing 3x, and over the course of several years add handstands, then handstands into a backbend . . . and it goes on . . . This is an intense opening and nerve cleansing in the body and needs to be worked into intelligently and gradually. Talk about a leap of faith ;) Dropping back into our world is a whole different perspective than moving forward into our world. Dropping back requires faith in ourselves, faith that we can catch ourselves and not fall on our head, developing this faith in yourself and your abilities is very rewarding.

We learn second series slowly, we do not jump into the entire series the first time we do it!

When to begin second series

When to actually begin 2nd series is unique and personal to each person, but there are some general guidelines. The most important component to starting 2nd series is to have a consistent daily practice.

ॐ You should know primary series—you do not be able to “do” all the postures, but know it, know where your body is in the postures, and keep your breath steady throughout your practice.

ॐ Most people are ready after about 1 year of practicing full primary (this varies though so do not take it too literally)

ॐ Your teacher says you are ready for it

ॐ You are dealing with an injury that is being healed by second series (i.e. sciatica or herniated discs)

ॐ The “new school” teachings in Mysore say that you should be able to drop back into and stand up from Urdhva Dhanurasana; this requirement keeps many people in primary for a long time! Sharath needs to do this due to the large number of students now coming through Mysore; too many students were moving ahead too fast without proper guidance from a good teacher. We are fortunate to have my teacher, Nancy Gilgoff, overseeing me and what I do so that I teach correctly to you ☺

Daily practice

ॐ This is very important!!! A daily practice connects you to higher yoga energy—even if your daily practice is 10–15 minutes long! Taking the time to practice daily puts you in a habit of a yoga lifestyle—it is not just the postures and asana that make a yogi healthy—it is the lifestyle. Practicing every day will connect you with healthier habits; making better food choices, connect you to your meditative mind -- “staying connected” by letting go of the mind games our lovely mind plays on us causing feelings of separation.



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ॐ Recommendations for daily practice:

- o Come to the studio 6 days per week ☺
- o Ok, so instead come 2–4 days per week to get full practice and the remaining days practice at home. Home practice can be as simple as Sun Salutes, finishing lotus flowers, and rest. As you set the habit you will naturally find that you will want to add on. As time permits each day work your way through practice to whatever point you get to, when you are out of time do your three lotus flowers and take rest.
- o Tips for daily practice: Pick a time and make it a routine! Ideally it should be the same time every day. If you are lucky enough to make it a morning time your chances are better of actually doing it. When our time is in the evening—chitta happens (chitta is mind stuff in Sanskrit); circumstances arise throughout the day that do not allow us to get to our evening practice.
- o If you are alternating between home practice and studio practice try to be consistent each week, i.e. m/w/f you come to the studio for 6 pm practice, t/th/sat. you practice at home. Write this schedule down! Put it on your calendar, hang it on your refrigerator . . .
- o Daily practice = 6 days per week (you get one day of rest each week), no practice on moon days (new moon and full moon) or during menstruation. So it is not really that difficult!

How to begin second series

The best way to learn second series is gradually, adding on one pose at a time to the end of primary series (the end being Setu Bandhasana A). Here is a recommended progression:

- ॐ Full primary + adding on one second series posture each week (approx.). Then back bending with Urdhva Dhanurasana including drop backs + closing. At our studio you will have the opportunity to do this at any the Mysore classes. You should do this practice 3x per week, and just primary 3x per week. If you find your body is too tired to do this long practice it is ok to skip vinyasa—better to skip vinyasa than skip postures!
 - o Once you learn these beginning asanas, a nice home practice = Sun Salutes, Standing poses, Padasana–Ushtrasana, closing.
- ॐ After you work your way up to eka pada Sirsasana (one leg behind your head) you have two options; you can either split primary and second, one day do primary – one day do second. Or you can still do some primary into second. In this case do half primary -- alternating which half; one day do paschimattanasana through Navasana then into 2nd, the next time do navasana – setu bandhasana then into 2nd. Again you should do this practice 2–3x each week, and primary 2–3x each week.
- ॐ After you learn 2nd up to pincha mayurasana you are ready to start 2nd after parsvottanasana. When practicing second series we only practice standing poses through parsvottanasana (praying hands behind back) then cut to second series. Full led second series is taught Saturday mornings at 10:00am, but you do not come into the led 2nd until you have learned at least up through eka pada sirsasana in the mysore classes, in the led class you will close after you have gone as far as you have learned mysore style.

If you are not able to do full lotus you do not need to go beyond Supta vajrasana—although if you want to continue beyond that pose use your own body intelligence to decide if it is appropriate for you.

Second series can be stimulating; and it stretches and detoxes the liver—the liver is where we store anger and anxiety so as we practice second series these emotions can be amplified as we work them out of our bodies. Emotional releases are more likely after second than primary, so if you find yourself weeping in rest pose it is ok . . . and maybe even a good thing . . .

Pay attention to you allow yourself an extended rest pose after practicing second and a good night's sleep.