

It's Not Wrong, It's Different: A Modern Approach to Yoga Asana



Updog with plantar flexion? Or updog with dorsi flexion? Tree with Namaste hands? Or tree with arms overhead? Yoga students attend classes from various instructors, possibly at different facilities, and often comment to the instructor: “Well, my other yoga instructor said the hands should be here.” Or, “In triangle, why is our bottom hand in front of the leg, and in other classes the hand is behind the leg?”

These questions or comments can add to participants’ confusion about what is the right, or correct, asana. In fact, neither is right or wrong. They are different. It’s the style of yoga that dictates the execution, which diversifies poses.

Many yoga instructors will teach from experience and their educational training.

However, at times this has led to a “Battle of the Asana” amongst various instructors. Professionals need to educate students that there are numerous, if not hundreds, of ways to perform yoga asana. With so many Westernized programs on the market, we are at a point where we should acknowledge and respect another’s teaching style, as well as educate our students on why execution varies amongst different classes.

A modern-day approach to yoga focuses on appropriate alignment, lever length and what is suitable for the injured or aging body. As the human body ages and evolves, it is common to find classes with students from ages 18 to 80 or participants who drop into classes with movement limitations such as multiple sclerosis or a third trimester pregnancy.

This approach is effective for any class, but especially for classes offered in facilities where yoga is part of the gym membership, and where the class does not specifically cater to one style. It also provides a solution for classes where attendance is inconsistent or the age and fitness ability vary greatly. Also, not all facilities will have props—which can make it possible for poses to be more widely accessible to all participants—available for classes. Thus, implementing and cueing two to three levels of asana allows individuals to work within their fitness capability and present energy state.

Progressions and Regressions

When instructing to the masses, each yoga pose can be regressed or progressed to stimulate strength, flexibility or balance challenges, or outcomes. Yoga poses can be viewed on an exercise continuum, similar to progressing and regressing common exercises like squats and lunges. Although there are countless progressions and regressions, here is a simple example of discovering how to decrease or increase the challenge of the asana, tree pose.

Regression			Progression	
←				
TREE POSE FOOT - HEEL ABOVE ANKLE, TOES ON FLOOR HANDS - CONTACT POINT ON HIP/THIGH	TREE POSE FOOT - CALF HANDS - NAMASKAR OR ADD CONTACT POINT - 1 HAND ON HIP	TREE POSE FOOT - INNER THIGH HANDS - NAMASKAR	TREE POSE FOOT - INNER THIGH HANDS - OVERHEAD	TREE POSE FOOT - INNER THIGH HANDS - OVERHEAD 1-2 EYES CLOSE

Two ways of cueing asana is to start with Level One and progress to Level Two and Level Three, respectively. An alternate cue is to explain the desired asana and follow it with, “To progress the pose slowly raise one or two arms overhead,” and “To regress, simply add a contact point and place your left hand on your hip.” Progressions and regressions allow for poses to be inclusive for everybody.

Injuries and Aging Bodies

American's health is suffering greatly, especially from injury, disease and age-related matters. A modern-day approach to yoga asana caters the pose to the body, which avoids feelings of failure or decreasing self-efficacy.

For example, many yoga classes instruct the transition between downward dog and upward facing through *chaturanga* and the rolling of the feet from dorsi flexion to plantar flexion. The opposing motion applies on the return to downward facing dog. However, students who have a fused or replaced ankle will experience a lack of mobility and less range of motion when trying to plantar flex. Therefore, a better option for these ankles would be to transition into a plank with a lowering of the hips to the floor to keep the feet in dorsi flexion. *Chaturanga* can still be used, but the main focus should be the safety of the vulnerable ankle joint. In essence, the only difference between the two styles of updog is simply that the foot position is different, and both still receive the many benefits of upward-facing dog.

Overall, a modern-day approach analyzes the original, ancient asana to see what works, or what needs to be altered to meet the needs of various populations or specific student injuries. When deeply analyzing asanas, the ancient teachings can be viewed as the correct or "right" way to perform poses. However, unless you are working with highly skilled yogis, a modern-day approach embraces all styles of yoga and effectively executes a class to the average American.

Remember, there is no one approach to instructing yoga asana. The only "wrong" way to teach yoga is to apply poses that are too advanced or are unsafe for your



student's population. By Elizabeth Kovar

Elizabeth Kovar M.A, personal trainer and yoga/fitness instructor, earned Yoga Alliance 318 hours in Ashtanga yoga & Chakra Meditation from the Ayurveda & Yoga Retreat and Hospital in Coonor, India. She studied yoga in five different countries, and learned through some of the best names in the yoga industry. Her Master's Thesis "Creating Yoga Programs for People with Movement Disabilities" was implemented on a 12 week research study for people with Stage 1-2 Parkinson's Disease with the University of Toledo Physical Therapy and Neurology Department. She resides in Seattle, WA and is the fitness coordinator at the City of Lynnwood Recreation Center. Elizabeth is also a freelance fitness / travel writer, workshop presenter and instructs an online Yoga 1 & 2 course for Walla Walla Community College. Questions or comments can be directed to erkovar@yahoo.com