

Art of Asana: Aging Gracefully A Yin Approach to Warming Up

By Liliias Folan

A student recently asked if my hatha yoga practice is the same now as when I was in my 20s. A bit defensively I answered, “Yes, of course.” As I pondered the question later, I realized a more honest answer is, “In my 60-something body I practice many of the same postures. I just do them differently.” I’ve come to name this “doing” a Yin Approach to warming up well and stretching while in the asana. Particularly important for those of us in mid-life, it is also an effective approach for beginners and for students returning to practice after a lapse. Let me explain the Yin Approach (not to be confused with Yin Yoga, in which poses are held for several minutes). The concept of yin and yang comes from the Taoist tradition. If something is yin, it can be described as cool, calm, inward, and focused—like the way we approach a stretching posture. Yang is moving, heated, excited, and intense—like a strengthening posture. Like a new piece added to a puzzle, I enjoy a Yin Approach, balanced with yang strength, in almost all postures. A Yin Approach to warming up my mid-age muscles and soft tissue makes me feel safer, more comfortable, and complete while in the posture.

In our late 20s, both muscle and layers of connective tissue begin to lose resiliency, and continue to change and contract every 7 to 10 years thereafter. Life’s stress, wear-and-tear injuries, and inactivity all leave their mark within the layers of the body. It is no wonder that the older we get, the more “creaky” we can feel. The good news is that no matter what your age, size, or shape, you can maintain or return to a graceful, fluid suppleness and strength by using the Yin Approach.

The Yin Approach is cool, calm, and focused, with occasional flashes of heat – it is knowing that asanas affect connective tissue as well as muscles. Muscles respond beautifully to pumping actions such as the dynamic moves pictured in the Standing Forward Bend (page 93). But connective tissue—tendons, ligaments, fascia—is different than muscle and needs to be treated differently. Connective tissue is fibrous, dryer, stiffer, and has less blood supply than muscle. When you move into your asana routine too quickly, too deeply, and without warming up enough, it is easy to irritate connective tissue, especially the fascia. Fascia covers your entire inner body like a saran-like bag, surrounding every muscle, gland, and organ. When fascia is irritated it contracts and takes a long time to heal. The underlying muscles are also affected.

Fascinating Fascia Facts

- Fascia facilitates every movement. It enables your muscles to move over and around organs without friction or resistance, and allows individual muscles to lengthen and shorten with ease.
- Fascia consistency changes with aging. It begins to lose resiliency in our late 20s and will continue to contract every 7 to 10 years thereafter.
- Age, injury, stress, toxins, inactivity, and excessive activity affect fascia. Even powerful emotions and thoughts may burrow deeply into fascia.
- Fascia does not respond well to brief, rhythmical stretches the way muscles do.

It is tough and fibrous and best pulled (warmed up) slowly, like taffy.

- Fascia accelerates its natural contracting process when you are ill or injured.

Still having trouble picturing fascia? Imagine pulling on a rubber dishwashing glove. Then pull a woolen glove over that. The rubber is the fascia; the woolen glove is muscle.

Using the Three Rs Effectively: Resist...Relax-Breathe... Restretch

- When using Resistance in a pose, do not let the limb that is being contracted move. Resistance pressure is even, focused—no bouncing.
- When using Resistance, do not push hard. This is not a red-faced, teeth-clenched push.
- Relax—breathe in...now a long exhale. Do not collapse; use the exhalation to help feel muscles relaxing.
- Restretching is holding the final position for the recommended length of time—expressed in breaths. Six breaths take about 30 seconds. Holding the posture longer is not necessarily better and can cause injury.
- Restretching is the final lengthening within the pose. Move very, very slowly...with one-pointed awareness. Feel the fibers lengthening...continue breathing and enjoy this new-found freedom.
- Release the extended position with awareness and care. You are stretching a muscle out of its normal range of motion. It is only sensible and feels nurturing to use other muscles to return your body to the starting position.

Caution: More is not always better when it comes to the three Rs. Never force your body into any position. To avoid overstretching, do the three Rs in the Triangle only twice a week. Remember to go slowly and consciously as you enter and exit the final pose•

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