

Judith Lasater, Ph.D., P.T.



30
essential

YOGA POSES

FOR BEGINNING STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS



RODMELL PRESS ♦ BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA ♦ 2003

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Advance Praise for *30 Essential Yoga Poses*

Beginning yoga students and their teachers will love this book. (And by the way, who isn't a beginner when it comes to yoga's core postures?) Judith Lasater has given us the basics, which are elegantly presented. She is a master of subtle detail, and writes with the consciousness of a highly skilled teacher who really loves what she does. What could be better? This book should be in the hands of every beginning student.

—Stephen Cope, L.I.C.S.W., author of *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*

In *30 Essential Yoga Poses*, Judith Lasater has distilled her immense knowledge of yoga into a clear presentation that any student can use to deepen his or her practice, thereby gaining more radiant health and accessing a pathway to self-discovery. May this book lead student and teacher alike to the highest experience that yoga can offer.

—John Friend, Founder of Anusara Yoga

Judith Lasater shares the treasure trove of wisdom, insight, and experience that she has gained through years of devoted teaching and service. Beautifully organized, *30 Essential Yoga Poses* is destined to be a classic, timeless resource for both student and teacher.

—Lilias Folan, host of the PBS series *Lilias, Yoga and You*

Once again, Judith Lasater has come through with an inspiring and informative book for students and teachers! For me, her compassionate presentation of the ethical responsibilities in the student-teacher relationship raises the professional bar, supporting those of us who teach to let yoga be the most that it can be. And her "Mantras for Daily Practice" give us overachievers permission to find balance with yoga.

—Elise Browning Miller, coauthor of *Life Is a Stretch*

I have high praise for Judith Lasater's *30 Essential Yoga Poses*. This is one book that I definitely want for my library. I enjoy how Judith skillfully weaves a tapestry of practical guidance for beginning students and

comprehensive instruction for their teachers. She untangles the complexities of hatha yoga, writing in clear and concise language from which we—beginning to advanced students and teachers—will benefit for years to come. Kudos and thanks, Judith. Your wisdom and teachings are our yoga community's gain.

—Richard C. Miller, Ph.D., author of *Infinite Awakening Yoga Nidra*

By Judith Lasater, Ph.D., P.T.

*Relax and Renew:
Restful Yoga for Stressful Times
(Rodmell Press, 1995)*

*Living Your Yoga:
Finding the Spiritual
in Everyday Life
(Rodmell Press, 2000)*

*30 Essential Yoga Poses:
For Beginning Students
and Their Teachers
(Rodmell Press, 2000)*

*Yoga for Pregnancy:
What Every Mom-to-Be Needs to Know
(Rodmell Press, 2004)*

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To my mother, Mildred Felix Miles Hanson, my first teacher

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THERE IS NO WAY TO THANK all the people who make the writing of a book possible. Nonetheless, I would like to try.

I thank my immediate and extended family for their constant encouragement. I extend special appreciation to my husband, Ike, for his expertise in communication and his willingness to share it with me. I thank my children—Miles, Kam, and Elizabeth—for their ability to help me repeatedly redefine practice throughout the years.

I acknowledge my very first yoga teachers, Sally and David Elsberry, who gave me the gift of my first yoga class and encouraged me to begin teaching so many years ago.

Without a doubt, my understanding of yoga would be significantly less without the practice and life of B. K. S. Iyengar, of Pune, India. I salute his dedication to the art of yoga, and am grateful for the knowledge and passion for practice that he has shared with me.

Namaste to my friends and colleagues Stephen Cope, John Friend, Liliias Folan, Elise Miller, and Richard Miller, for giving of themselves to this book and their heartfelt praise for this work.

My gratitude goes to the editorial and design team for their expertise and vision: editor Linda Cogozzo; Gopa and Veetam, the designers at Gopa & Ted2, Inc.; copy editor Katherine L. Kaiser; and indexer Ty Koontz.

I am especially thankful to the crew who made the photographs possible: yoga teacher Theresa Elliott, for her patient and enthusiastic modeling; photographer David Martinez, who created images that are not only beautiful, but also effective practice and teaching aids; Mark Dawson, for his technical expertise and good humor; France Dushane, for hair, makeup, and her gentle ways; studio manager Aneata Hagy, for her skillful organization behind the scenes; Lylia Baylin and Jeff Mason, caterers extraordinaire; and Shelly Martinez, for her uplifting presence.

My appreciation goes to those people and companies who generously gave us their products to photograph: Hollie Brinkman, Emily Dalton, and Eric Johnson at Hugger-Mugger Yoga Products; Marie Wright at Marie Wright Yoga Wear; and Whitney Winter at the Meco Corporation.

I am grateful to my publishers, Donald Moyer and Linda Cogozzo, at Rodmell Press, for their practical advice, which was of immeasurable help in shaping this book.

Finally, I thank my students, from whom I have learned the most about yoga, about teaching, and about myself.

PART ONE

BEGINNING WITH AN ANCIENT TRADITION

THIRTY ESSENTIAL YOGA POSES is designed to support your understanding of yoga through a well-rounded practice. I wrote the book for you, the student, even if you are at the most beginning level, as well as for your teachers. To study and teach yoga is to learn about yourself, especially about the abilities of your body and mind, as well as the challenges that they present to wholeness. Although the practice of yoga is a lifetime study, you can begin it simply and directly, a little at a time. When approached this way, learning about yourself is a discovery process that is fascinating, that is satisfying, and that will remain forever delightfully unfinished.



ABOUT YOGA

Classical yoga is a philosophical system that has its roots in ancient India. It remains vital today because yoga addresses the fundamental questions that we all face about health, awareness, and a life well lived. Although *yoga* is now a household word in the West, its philosophical background is not well known or understood here.

Yoga comes from Sanskrit, the scriptural language of ancient India. Its root is *yuj*, which means “to yoke” or “to unite.” The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, written in approximately 200 B.C.E., is generally accepted as the ultimate source book of classical yoga. In this revered text, Patanjali, who is thought to have been a physician, Sanskrit scholar, grammarian, and yogi, presents *astanga yoga*, or an “eight-limbed path” of practice.

The path begins with ten ethical precepts called *yamas* (restraints) and *niyamas* (observances). Called the first limb, the five *yamas* are *ahimsa* (nonharming), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (nonstealing), *bramacharya* (clarity about sexual activity), and *aparighha* (nongreed). Georg Feuerstein, author of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, says that the *yamas* “make up ‘*maha-vrata*’ (the great vow) of the *yogin* [and *yogini*] and are to be practiced on all levels, irrespective of time, place, and circumstance.”¹ The *niyamas*, which comprise the second limb, are *shauca* (purity), *samtosha* (contentment), *tapas* (discipline), *svadhyaya* (self-study), and *ishvara pranidhana* (surrender to God).

The third and fourth limbs, respectively, are *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (breath control). My study of *asana* and *pranayama* has been influenced by the work of B. K. S. Iyengar, author of the classic text *Light on Yoga* and numerous other books. In 1974 and 1976, I studied with him at various venues in the United States. In addition, I have traveled three times to the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, in Pune, India, to study with him and his daughter, Geeta Iyengar. I am grateful to Mr. Iyengar and to Geeta Iyengar for their teaching, which inspires my own.

The fifth limb is *pratyahara* (the conscious withdrawal from the agitation of the senses). The sixth limb is *dharana* (concentration), the seventh limb is *dhyana* (meditation), and the eighth limb is *samadhi* (oneness). Taken together, the eight limbs help to develop self-awareness.

The practice of *asana* is the most easily recognized limb of yoga in the West. But, as can be seen from this brief introduction, *asana* is only a part of the whole picture of yoga practice. Although it is not my intention to offer instruction in all the limbs of Patanjali’s yoga, I have woven their principles into the text. For example, do you practice *aparighha* (nongreed) when you covet another student’s pose, wishing that you could do an advanced one as well?

It is my belief that no limb of yoga can be separated from the whole tree of its existence. Just as humans are complex beings who exist on a multiplicity of levels, yoga, if it is to serve such beings, must be studied on its many levels as well. References for continued study are listed in “Resources,” which can be found in Part Five, “And More.”

ABOUT THE BOOK

I have organized *30 Essential Yoga Poses* in a way that I hope will encourage and simplify your practice. Part One, “Beginning with an Ancient Tradition,” is a general overview of the philosophical foundation of yoga and why it is relevant today.

Part Two, “Being a Student, Being a Teacher,” focuses on the student-teacher relationship. In earlier times, the yoga teacher worked with his or her student on a one-to-one basis. Today, most of yoga is taught in a class setting. Regardless of the forum, the relationship between student and teacher is essential to yoga. The teacher, who has presumably traversed the landscape, leads the student on his or her journey over the same terrain. And the relationship is a mutual one: the teacher learns from the student along the way.

It is my deep wish to educate students and teachers alike about the learning potential within this relationship. Not only do I give suggestions to help students learn more effectively should they choose to attend yoga classes, but I also offer guidelines to help teachers do their jobs with more awareness, knowledge, and compassion.

The thirty essential yoga poses are introduced in Part Three, “The Poses.” I begin my discussion of each pose with my reflections. Then I describe how to sequence the pose with other poses; I follow this with the benefits and cautions. Next come nuts and bolts guidelines in what I call “The Essential Pose”: what props are necessary; how to set up for the pose; the experience of the pose itself; and how to come out of the pose. I detail variations for each pose. As such, there are actually ninety-six poses presented in *30 Essential Yoga Poses*.

Part Three also includes specific information for teachers in “Primary Focus” and “Primary Adjustment.” The former points out what to keep in mind when teaching the pose. The latter discusses what not to overlook when you help the student experience a more comfortable and enriched pose. Even if you do not teach yoga, I invite you to consult the sections for teachers, where you will find helpful suggestions for your personal practice.

Part Four, “The Practice,” puts the poses together into coherent sequences. To open you to the possibilities that yoga philosophy offers, I include intentions for each practice session, which I call “Mantra for Daily Practice.” The mantras are short, poignant phrases or sentences intended to help you gather your thoughts and declare an intention for your practice that day. In addition, I state the purpose of each sequence, and offer encouragement to my colleagues in “A Word to Teachers.”

The first sequence is called “Busy Days Practice,” for when there doesn’t seem to be any time at all for yoga. The next approach is called “Day-of-the-Week Practice,” which divides the thirty essential poses into seven daily practices. This easy-to-follow guide covers all the poses, either the essential pose or a variation, in a week.

The third approach is called “Theme Practice.” For example, you can choose to concentrate on your lower back, or on flexibility for your hamstrings, or on your upper back and shoulders. Alternatively, you can choose to spend a practice session working on improving your balance, increasing your overall strength, reducing your fatigue, or creating relaxation. I encourage teachers to use these sequences in planning classes. Finally, the last section of Part Four is “The 30 Essential Yoga Poses Practice,” and is intended for days when you have the time and inclination to devote yourself to an in-depth practice.

Once you decide on which practice approach you want to follow on any specific day, you will find an illustrated list of poses to accomplish your goals. If needed, you can refer back to Part Three, where detailed instructions are given for each of those poses.

Finally, Part Five, “And More,” presents a glossary of anatomical terms and resources.

GO FOR THE JOY

In my early twenties, I chose to take my first yoga class to improve my health. Yoga stuck with me: I stuck with yoga. My personal study of yoga quickly became a passion that manifested itself in my own regular daily practice and evolved to include teaching others. Since 1971, I have enjoyed sharing yoga practice in classes and workshops worldwide.

In *30 Essential Yoga Poses*, I try to share with you the joy I get from practicing and teaching yoga. More important, I hope that the book inspires you to find your own joy, and to create and sustain your own personal home practice. I also hope that this book offers information and stimulation to my fellow yoga teachers, who continuously strive to refine their skills in the important art of teaching. My warmest and best wishes as you continue your own discovery of the ancient-and yet eternally new-study, practice, and teaching of yoga.

PART TWO

BEING A STUDENT, BEING A TEACHER

YOUR IMPETUS to practice yoga may be physical, such as a desire to increase your flexibility or to reduce the toll of stress on your body. Or you may want to experience equanimity or to gain spiritual insight. Or perhaps the yoga class was the only class with any openings at your local community center. Whatever your reason, yoga is an adventure of self-discovery.



Some students prefer to explore yoga on their own, studying from books and practicing at home. But most likely you study yoga with a teacher, and you use books and other resources to reinforce your practice in between classes. An ongoing relationship with a teacher can be a valuable tool that facilitates self-awareness. This relationship is powerful: it is useful to examine it in depth. This part of the book does just that.

Although some information is for students and some is for teachers, I encourage all readers to examine this part thoroughly. If you are a student, you may find that understanding the viewpoint of your teacher and his or her challenges helps you to become a more focused student. If you are a teacher, remembering the concerns of your students will undoubtedly stimulate the compassion necessary to teach.

THE STUDENT CHOOSES THE TEACHER

You may be so conditioned by years of schooling that you no longer question what it means to be a student. The student-teacher relationship in yoga is different from the relationships that you had with your teachers in school. The primary difference is that you as the yoga student have much more responsibility than you had in school.

To be a yoga student is to take charge of your own practice, your own growth, and your own life in ways that you may never have done before. To be a yoga student is to remain conscious of the *process* of learning, not just the *content* of what you are learning. You may find it interesting and enlightening to observe how you react to difficult poses as well as easy ones. What comes up for you in the learning process? Do you expect to learn quickly and become frustrated when you do not? If you remain aware of the process of learning, then the lessons of the poses can be taken from the experiences that you have on the mat and applied to the experiences of living your life, minute by minute and even thought by thought.

It is you, the student, who chooses your teacher. Paradoxically, the primary relationship that you have in yoga practice is with yourself. As you practice the poses, you begin to notice how you speak to yourself, what you demand of yourself, and how you judge yourself. When something is difficult, do you admonish yourself or do you encourage yourself? Do you approach a challenge good-naturedly or do you mutter about your shortcomings under your breath?

The same is true for the teacher. Each teacher experiences a relationship with herself as she practices. The quality of this relationship with the self will be expressed during the act of teaching a class. *A teacher cannot teach any differently from how she practices.* Inevitably, the internal relationship a teacher has with her personal practice is revealed through her attitude, actions, and language in class. So check out the teacher. Is your need for respect met when she speaks to you or adjusts you in a pose? Does your teacher sometimes cross a verbal or physical boundary which you would prefer be maintained? These observations can lead you to find a class that meets your needs for safety and respect.

BOUNDARIES: CREATING A RESTORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

It is the job of the yoga teacher to create and maintain a healthful environment in which he or she can teach and the student can learn. A vital component of such an environment is boundaries. Rooted in yoga's ethical precepts, the *yamas* and *niyamas*, which I discuss in Part One, "Beginning with an Ancient Tradition," these boundaries are not just a dry list of prohibitions and prescriptions, but point toward what is best for both teacher and student. *The most important aspect of the student-teacher*