

THREE MAIN WAYS TO APPROACH YOUR PERSONAL YOGA PRACTICE DESIGN (AND YOUR YOGA CLASSES)

What is the best strategy for structuring our personal practice from day to day? Which practices should we choose? How often should we do them? Do we attend to our needs in the moment or do we need a long-term strategy? There are **three main ways to approach your personal yoga practice – narrow, broad and deep**. You can apply the same strategies to structuring your yoga classes, as well. Here are the pros and cons of each approach.

Approach 1: ZOOMING IN (by attending to whatever you have going on today)

PERSONAL PRACTICE: Close your eyes, check in with yourself and identify an issue that seems the most pressing today, whether it is a physical, energetic or emotional one. Once you identify your priority, choose (or create) a yoga practice that addresses that particular concern.

YOGA CLASSES: Ask your students for their requests, or set up and articulate your own specific agenda, as in “Today we will be working with neck and upper back tension”, for example. In the course of the class consistently bring their attention to the area of focus and ask them to evaluate their sensations at the beginning and the end of the practice to note if any change takes place.

PROS: This type of practice feels relevant and personalized. It helps your body and mind, and it also encourages “I can deal with it” attitude, which is essential to help us feel in charge of our circumstances. It can also give you confidence that whatever happens in the future, you will be able to handle it.

CONS: You might get pulled in different directions from day to day while attending to more pressing issues; an approach like that does not facilitate deeper transformation. You might end up chasing your symptoms but never arrive at addressing deeper underlying issues that cause those symptoms.

Approach 2: SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW (by methodically covering a particular broader theme)

PERSONAL PRACTICE: You make a conscious choice to work with your body, energy or mind in systematic manner. For example, you can start by working with your neck, then move on to your shoulders, then your upper back, lower back, and so on. You will end up making a round of the entire body over 2-3 weeks and then restart the process. This type of approach doesn't need to be body-centered - you can do the same thing by working with chakras, for example, making your way from the root to the crown chakra, or you can explore different pranayama techniques, and so on.

YOGA CLASSES: You create miniseries around specific broad topics. Whether or not you call them series, you build continuity from grouping several classes around the same topic and exploring that topic from different angles. That topic might not be the main priority for your students, but any human being would benefit from learning about it and experiencing those practices.

PROS: This approach is very beneficial for working on general health and wellness. It gives you exposure to the practices that you might have never tried on your own, it expands your horizons both knowledge-wise and experience-wise. It can be a great jump-off point for further deeper exploration.

CONS: Since it explores more general topics without diving deep into any one issue, students tend to be less invested in the outcome. It has more of a sense of a tasting buffet where you get a little bit of everything over time. Your practice is less likely to become truly personal and necessary for your wellbeing.

Approach 3: TRANSFORMATION POTENTIAL (by going deeper)

PERSONAL PRACTICE: You are primarily focused on the idea of personal transformation. It encourages you to take a look at the bigger picture - Where are you in your life? Where are you going? What kind of obstacles are getting in your way and how can you overcome them? In this approach, you pick a particular yoga practice and stick with it for a while (months, sometimes years). It is best if this practice was developed specifically for you by your yoga teacher, or you can pick one that resonates with you the most. Those are the practices that usually involve introspection, energy work, meditation, and so on - they impact you on a deeper level. As you do the same practice day after day, month after month (with full attention), you begin to understand and unpack different aspects of your experience and begin to change your reactions and perceptions. This is much deeper work, but it's also more meaningful. This is what yoga was meant to be.

YOGA CLASSES: This kind of work is not really possible in the context of a yoga class, because it is highly individual. You can insert snippets of it into your yoga classes in the form of integrative yoga practices. In integrative yoga classes, you can explore general themes or ideas (for example, gratitude, mental clarity, stability, vitality, and so on), but it would be up to each student to apply that theme to what's happening in her personal life. This approach is much more effective in one-on-one work with a qualified yoga teacher, who serves as a guide along this process, fine-tunes your practice to your life, illuminates your blind spots, and helps you weather the highs and lows along the way.

PROS: This is what the deep work of yoga is all about. By definition, yoga is meant to help you settle your mental chatter and see yourself for who you are, and reality for what it is. Our ideas, perceptions and past experiences constantly get in the way of that, but through the process of transformational yoga practice we can let go of our biggest attachments and get some clarity. This is the most meaningful approach.

CONS: This kind of work is very deep and potentially profound - it is not for everybody. The very first sutra states: "Now (if you are ready) is set forth the authoritative teaching of yoga". *If you are ready* is a very important piece. If we are not ready, we cannot go there. But we can let them know that it's out there for them when they are ready.

