

Starting Out – Yoga for Beginners Video

By The Yoga Journal
Review by Judith Lasater

Let's be honest from the beginning. I do not like yoga videos. Perhaps I am hopelessly old-fashioned; but I simply believe that yoga is best taught in that dynamic relationship between student and teacher – live. However, I am also a practical person.

The demands of modern life cry out for a regular yoga practice. At the same time the realities of life make it virtually impossible for many of us to commit the time to attend a class. For this reason, having the convenience of a yoga video at home is an obvious benefit.

Yoga for Beginners was created by *Yoga Journal* magazine and Healing Arts Productions, and is a landmark in its genre. Probably one of the outstanding features of this 75 minute practice tape is that it is visually so beautiful. The opening sequence with yoga teacher Patricia Walden of Boston is aesthetic enough to be called "art". Walden is shown

practicing flowing asanas in Death Valley National Park at sunrise. The interplay of sunlight and shadow, of curve and line, of backbend and forward bend, is stunning. Peter Dawson's original and lovely music accompanies this segment and continues through the entire video.

The program begins in a studio practice session with a simple sitting pose progressing to a stretch with the arms overhead, and the beginner is at once practicing yoga without worrying about it. With this straightforward beginning, Walden has taken the mystery out of yoga for the reluctant student.

The main portion of the video concentrates on several of the standing poses in the Iyengar tradition. The poses are repeated at least twice on each side so that the practitioner can really learn about the pose. Walden has a soothing voice and she is careful to gently encourage the viewer to move at his or her own pace and to challenge without pushing. I would have liked a little more variety in camera angles at this stage, which might have made the film a more effective teaching tool. When the camera angle did shift, I found it quite valuable.

Following the standing poses, the action quiets down and the student is instructed in several sitting poses. Here I have a bit of an argument with the sequence. One of the sitting poses is Paschimottanasana, at once seemingly

simple and yet the most difficult of the sitting poses. The student sits with both legs straight in front and bends forward from the hips. Flexible students are able to put the chest on the thighs and the head on the shins. In the real world of yoga students, however, very few are able to do this. Most people will unduly round the lower back while attempting this pose. This reverses the normal lumbar curve and puts many pounds of pressure on the normal lumbar intervertebral discs. Nowhere in the video does Walden mention that this pose might be inappropriate for those suffering from lower back pathology. There are adequate warnings at the beginning of the video about the elements of risk in any exercise program, but I feel that Paschimotanasana is not at all a beginner's pose and should have been left out completely. I actually do not teach this pose at all to beginners for the simple reason that none of them can do it without compromising the lumbar spinal structures.

Another questionable choice of posture is the shoulderstand. Whereas the supported version shown is not as problematic as the full shoulderstand, too few blankets are used in the video to adequately demonstrate the lift of the pelvis which gives the benefits of *Viparita Karani*. Also, there is no admonition given to those with hiatal hernias or to menstruating or pregnant women to avoid this pose.

Finally, the video ends with a very relaxing Savasana, corpse pose. There is some attention to breathing here, which adds to the depth of the relaxation. Walden does a very good job with this pose, bringing the spiritual aspects of yoga into the pose without calling them by name.

or someone who does not like yoga videos as a matter of principle, I liked this one pretty well. If you **MUST** have a video to practice with, *Yoga for Beginners* would be a good choice.

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Stretch and Surrender

By Annalisa Cunningham

Rudra Press, Box 1973, Cambridge, Mass.

Reviewed by Donna Martin

“Recovery from alcoholism, substance abuse, and other compulsive, addictive behaviors involves a complete lifestyle change...it requires a lifestyle that enhances the health and growth of the whole person.”

For Annalisa Cunningham, author of *Stretch and Surrender: a Guide to Yoga, Health, and Relaxation for People in Recovery*, a combination of Hatha Yoga with the Twelve Step philosophy has opened the way to recovery. As a counselor at Feather River Alcohol and Chemical Recovery Program in California, Cunningham developed a yoga program for patients, family members, and the community at large. The program is based on her personal experience of how yoga and the Twelve Step philosophy worked together in her life. “Hatha Yoga complemented my recovery work perfectly. It helped my body to heal, my mind to clear, and my emotions to calm.”

Addiction, points out Cunningham, is a three-fold disease: physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual. “One of the greatest gifts the Twelve Step program gave me was a comfortable outlet for expression of my spirituality.”

Cunningham began by incorporating the Twelve Step philosophy into her personal yoga practice. “While I was stretching my body I thought about the positive sayings I learned at the meetings, such as “easy does it” and “let go and let God.” Cunningham made up her own affirmations to say while holding various yoga poses. She was able to come up with a positive thought correlating to the Twelve Steps for each yoga posture. Following the postures, Cunningham uses relaxation visualizations that are “deliberately intended to encourage recovery.” Now teaching yoga to people in recovery, she focuses on relaxation and self-esteem.

Cunningham had learned for herself how important it was to her recovery to take care of her body. In her book, she explains how and why Hatha Yoga helps to do this, and includes journal entries from several students describing how they, too, have benefitted from yoga. Steve, a recovering alcoholic, writes of the physical relaxation and mental calming that he’s experienced

through yoga. Candace, another recovering addict, describes how yoga has helped her become "more in tune with" her body. "I like myself better," she adds.

Cunningham goes on in the book to explain breathing and positive thinking. The affirmation she has assigned to each yoga posture is to be spoken silently while holding the pose. One example is the statement that accompanies the Camel pose (*ustrasana*), "I am open and receptive to my Higher Power." Using affirmations in this way, explains Cunningham, allows "the opening and healing [to be] achieved on three levels simultaneously as I physically demonstrate, mentally affirm, and spiritually acknowledge my receptivity to a Higher Power." Each affirmation is attuned to the "inner feelings of the pose and helps people develop self-worth." As an addictions counselor, I know that this is particularly beneficial for people in recovery because of the strength of old negative thought patterns – what Alcoholics Anonymous calls "stinkin' thinkin'." Self-esteem is crucial to recovery.

Cunningham's approach to yoga is clearly self-nurturing. One student, a "recovering Adult Child" (ACoA), states that she found the gentleness of yoga to be an important factor. "I like knowing that gentleness and patience with myself actually gets me better results than impatience and force."

The chapter on yoga postures is presented simply and clearly, the models are real people and the photos, for the most part, are not intimidating. Each posture includes a photo and simple directions with breathing. An affirmation accompanies each posture, as does a comment about the benefits of the pose. Some cautions are given, but generally the instructions are so basic that some of the more potentially difficult poses, like seated forward bend (*paschimottanasana*) and "simple inverted pose" (modified shoulder-stand) would have been better left out, in my opinion. A total of 32 postures are given, followed by a suggested three-week routine.

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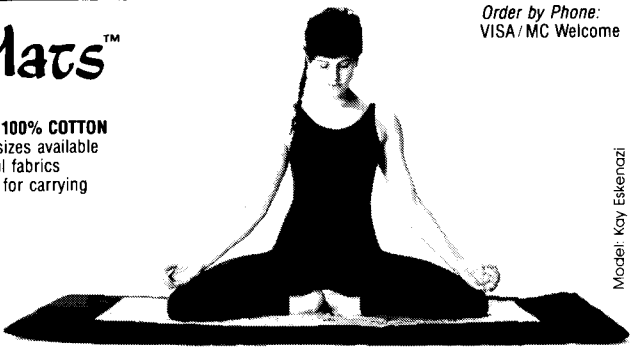
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Generally, *Stretch and Surrender* offers a clear and inviting introduction to yoga for beginners. What makes it more than just another yoga book is the way the practice is combined with the Twelve Step approach for people in recovery from the effects of addiction. This is a perfect marriage, and Cunningham does a good job presenting this powerful combination.

Yoga – Practicing Postures (An Easy-to-do Workbook)

By Connie Weiss
Lurie Lane Publishing, Box 893, Morro Bay, CA 93442
Reviewed by Donna Martin

Connie Weiss has been teaching yoga classes for over twenty years. She has been influenced by Indra Devi, the Iyengar tradition, and, most recently, by T.K.V. Desikachar and Professor A.G. Mohan. In response to the needs of her students she has put together an excellent manual for people of all levels “to facilitate individual practice sessions.”

The five segments of the workbook cover Standing, Kneeling, Supine, Prone, and Seated postures. Each segment begins with clear simple directions, suggestions, and cautions. Weiss also includes quotes from her yoga teachers, such as the reminder from Richard Miller, “When you practice, the pose should be inside you, not you in the pose.” The quotes do a wonderful job of succinctly conveying the style and philosophy of Weiss’ approach to yoga.

Desikachar-style stick drawings are used to present the postures (over 100 of them), making this manual most useful as an accompaniment for classes, or for therapy sessions. The instructions are brief and clear, serving for the most part as reminders for students or teachers already familiar with the pose. I would recommend the manual as an excellent resource for yoga teachers and therapists, and even as a teaching text. Appropriate sequences and counterposes are given and a special symbol indicates poses that can be done while seated on a chair. I like the “special movements” at the end of the book: for hands, ankles, feet, face, neck and shoulders. The book concludes with two variations of the Sun Salutation, Savasana, and a suggested practice session against the wall.

Connie has created an effective yoga practice manual – it works!