

SHAMATHA YOGA

Overview

Shamatha yoga is a simple series of nine yoga postures developed by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche during his retreat in India in January of 2002. They are designed to develop mindfulness as well as loosen the body during breaks from formal sitting meditation.

Shamatha yoga brings awareness of how the body feels as it moves and holds the different asanas, or postures. It invites one to gently stretch, move stagnant energy, and increase flexibility. This is not a yoga practice per se; it is a practice of mindfulness of body, of feeling one's physicality. Returning to sitting practice, the meditator feels refreshed and relaxed, allowing the mind to sink deeply and comfortably into the experience of body.

This particular series of movements stretches the spine forward and back, side to side, and in twisting motions, gently moving the body's energy. Shamatha yoga allows the practitioner to join heaven and earth in a simple, direct way, increasing the sense of groundedness and vastness in meditation.

Guidelines for when to do Shamatha Yoga

Shamatha yoga is recommended to use during intensive practice, such as nyinthun, if there is a qualified leader (see below). During Shambhala Training levels it may be used at the beginning and end of a sitting period, or in place of walking. It is not meant to replace lujong. Further specific guidelines will be forthcoming from Shambhala Training International. In general, it is recommended to do a session or two of shamatha yoga whenever people are engaged in extended sitting, in weekend programs, or during the practice period for evening classes.

Guidelines for demonstrating the postures

There is no a formal process for training instructors at this point. Please consider the following guidelines when demonstrating the postures properly so that physical injury is prevented:

1. Meditation instructors and teachers who are already skilled and trained in another body movement discipline should undertake the responsibility of showing others how to do the postures on a formal basis. The main point of the practice is to connect with body and loosen up a bit. The inner sense of each posture (i.e., bodhichitta, offering, etc) is as important as the physical movement itself.
2. Ideally, people who are demonstrating the postures would have learned them in the context of a program led by the Sakyong or someone who has been taught by him. However this is not strictly necessary.
3. The Practice and Education department within each Center is responsible for making sure that appropriate people are demonstrating the postures.
4. Whenever the postures are first demonstrated the following disclaimer must be either read literally or paraphrased:

Shambhala Yoga involves postures and movements that you may find to be physically difficult. As with many forms of discipline that involves bodily exercise, Shambhala Yoga includes an inherent element of risk of personal injury. However, you can prevent harm to your body by being careful at all times and avoiding or discontinuing any activity that causes you pain or physical distress. Individuals who have pre-existing medical conditions should not undertake any exercise that could aggravate such conditions.

Exceptions to the above:

Some people who do not exactly fit the above criteria may teach the postures. These exceptions will be handled through the Office of Practice and Education and the Office of the Sakyong. Such exceptions might include being asked directly by the Sakyong or an Acharya to lead a session. If you feel strongly that you should be allowed to teach this discipline and don't fit the above criteria, please contact OP&E.

What resources are available to learn shamatha yoga?

We have a simple set of written instructions with photographs which can be purchased through Vajradhatu Publications and Recordings is preparing a video showing the postures though this may not be complete for several months. There are several seminars which show the Sakyong doing the postures (Three Jewels, Halifax, May 2002 and Vajrayana Seminary talks). While these are interesting and useful, they are not sufficient to use as actual training videos.

Over time these guidelines will no doubt evolve, but this is where we will begin.

The "Introduction to Shamatha Yoga" booklet is available from Vajradhatu Publications (www.shambhalashop.com). Please call them at (902) 421-1550, ext.1; email at shop@shambhala.org; to place an order.