

ashtanga yoga the intermediate series

Ashtanga Yoga the Intermediate Series is a vital phase in the traditional Ashtanga yoga practice, often referred to as the “Nadi Shodhana” or “nerve cleansing” series. Building upon the foundational Primary Series (Yoga Chikitsa), the Intermediate Series (also known as the Nadi Shodhana series) challenges practitioners to deepen their physical strength, flexibility, and mental focus. This stage marks a significant transition as practitioners begin to explore more advanced postures, breath techniques, and internal awareness. Whether you are an experienced practitioner or a dedicated beginner aspiring to progress, understanding the nuances of the Intermediate Series can significantly enhance your yoga journey.

Understanding Ashtanga Yoga and Its Structure

Before diving into the specifics of the Intermediate Series, it's essential to grasp the overall structure of Ashtanga yoga. Developed by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Ashtanga is a dynamic and flowing style of yoga characterized by a fixed sequence of postures linked with Ujjayi breathing and deliberate gazes (drishti). The practice is traditionally divided into six series:

- Primary Series (Yoga Chikitsa) – Focuses on detoxification and alignment
- Intermediate Series (Nadi Shodhana) – Builds strength and stamina
- Advanced A Series (Sthira Bhaga) – Emphasizes strength and balance
- Advanced B, C, D Series – Further refine mastery and complexity

The Intermediate Series is typically introduced after a practitioner has mastered the Primary Series and developed a stable, consistent practice.

What Is the Intermediate Series?

Definition and Purpose

The Ashtanga Intermediate Series aims to purify and strengthen the nervous system by opening the energy channels (nadis). It involves more complex postures, including deep backbends, hip openers, and arm balances. The series helps to prepare the practitioner for the even more challenging Advanced Series by cultivating resilience, flexibility, and internal awareness.

Key Features of the Intermediate Series

- Introduction of more challenging postures that require increased strength and flexibility
- Focus on internal cleansing of the nervous system and energy channels
- Increased emphasis on breath control and bandhas (internal locks)
- Development of mental focus and stability

Components of the Intermediate Series

The Intermediate Series is typically divided into two main parts: the First Series (Nadi Shodhana/Secondary Series) and the Second Series (Sthira Bhaga/Advanced Series). Most practitioners focus on the first part, which is called the Madhyama Series or Intermediate Series, before progressing to the advanced series.

Postures in the Intermediate Series

The series includes a wide array of postures that build upon the foundation established in the Primary Series. Some notable postures include:

- **Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose):** Deep hip opener and forward bend
- **Supta Kurmasana (Reclining Tortoise):** Advanced hip opening with a deep stretch
- **Uttana Pristhasana (Extended Side Angle):** Strengthens legs and opens hips
- **Backbends such as Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow)**
- **Arm balances like Kukkutasana (Cockerel Pose)**
- **Supine and seated postures working on spinal flexibility and core strength**

The sequence is designed to systematically deepen flexibility and strength, with each posture preparing the body for the next.

Breath and Bandha Techniques in the Intermediate Series

Ujjayi Breathing

In the Intermediate Series, Ujjayi breath becomes even more vital as it maintains internal heat and focus. The breath should be steady, audible, and controlled, serving as an anchor amid complex postures.

Bandhas (Internal Locks)

The practice emphasizes the engagement of bandhas:

- **Mula Bandha:** Root lock, engagement of the pelvic floor
- **Uddiyana Bandha:** Abdominal lock, lifting the lower belly inward and upward
- **Jalandhara Bandha:** Throat lock, chin slightly tucked

These locks help to channel energy, stabilize the core, and facilitate deeper postures.

Advantages of Practicing the Intermediate Series

Engaging with the Intermediate Series offers numerous physical, mental, and energetic benefits, including:

- Enhanced flexibility, especially in the hips, shoulders, and spine
- Increased strength and stamina
- Deepened internal awareness and energetic cleansing
- Improved posture and spinal health
- Strengthening of the nervous system

- Preparation for advanced postures in the Sthira Bhaga series

Practitioners often report a sense of mental clarity and resilience after consistent practice.

Precautions and Preparations for the Intermediate Series

Since the Intermediate Series involves more complex and demanding postures, proper preparation is essential:

- Mastery of the Primary Series with consistent, stable practice
- Development of sufficient strength and flexibility in the hips, shoulders, and spine
- Good understanding of Ujjayi breathing and bandhas
- Consultation with an experienced Ashtanga teacher for guidance and adjustments
- Gradual progression to avoid injury or strain

It's recommended to approach the Intermediate Series gradually, respecting your body's limits and listening to your teacher's advice.

Transitioning to the Advanced Series

Practicing the Intermediate Series consistently over months or years can prepare the practitioner for the Advanced Series. This progression involves mastering more complex postures such as Karandavasana (Duck Pose), Vasca Dandasana, and challenging backbends. Transitioning requires patience, dedication, and often additional preparatory practices like yoga therapy or personalized adjustments.

Incorporating the Intermediate Series into Your Practice

For those eager to incorporate the Intermediate Series into their routine:

1. Ensure your Primary Series practice is well-established and comfortable
2. Consult with an experienced Ashtanga teacher to learn the correct sequence and postures
3. Practice with mindfulness, emphasizing breath, bandhas, and internal focus
4. Listen to your body and avoid pushing beyond your limits
5. Maintain consistency and patience; progress takes time

Many practitioners find that practicing the Intermediate Series two to three times a week allows steady progress without overexertion.

Conclusion

Ashtanga Yoga the Intermediate Series represents a transformative phase in the yogic journey, serving as a bridge between foundational work and advanced mastery. It demands discipline, patience, and a respectful approach to the body's signals, but the rewards—greater strength, flexibility, mental clarity, and energetic cleansing—are well worth the effort. Embracing this series can deepen your practice, expand your internal awareness, and set the stage for even more profound exploration in the path of yoga. Whether you are aiming to master the postures or cultivate a more resilient mind, the Intermediate Series offers invaluable tools for growth and self-discovery.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the key differences between the Ashtanga Yoga Primary Series and the Intermediate Series?

The Intermediate Series, also known as Nadi Shodhana, focuses on deeper hip openers, backbends, and cleansing practices, building upon the foundation of the Primary Series by increasing intensity and complexity to enhance strength and flexibility.

How should I prepare physically and mentally for practicing the Ashtanga Intermediate Series?

Preparation involves mastering the Primary Series, developing consistent breath and vinyasa flow, and cultivating mental focus. It's important to listen to your body, work with a qualified teacher, and gradually build

strength and flexibility before advancing to the Intermediate Series.

Are there specific contraindications or precautions for practicing the Intermediate Series in Ashtanga Yoga?

Yes, individuals with injuries, back problems, or joint issues should consult a healthcare professional before practicing the Intermediate Series. It's essential to practice under guidance, modify poses as needed, and progress gradually to avoid strain or injury.

What are some common challenges faced when progressing through the Ashtanga Intermediate Series?

Practitioners often encounter challenges with increased hip opening, backbends, and stamina. Mental focus and patience are crucial, as some poses can be physically demanding, and consistent practice helps overcome these hurdles over time.

How does the Intermediate Series enhance overall yoga practice and personal growth?

The Intermediate Series deepens strength, flexibility, and breath control, fostering greater mental clarity and discipline. It also prepares practitioners for advanced poses, promoting perseverance, self-awareness, and inner transformation.

Is it necessary to master the Primary Series before starting the Intermediate Series in Ashtanga Yoga?

Yes, it is generally recommended to have a solid foundation in the Primary Series, as it establishes the foundational breath, vinyasa, and alignment skills needed to safely and effectively progress to the Intermediate Series. Practicing under the guidance of an experienced teacher is highly advised.

Additional Resources

Ashtanga Yoga Intermediate Series: A Comprehensive Exploration

The Ashtanga Yoga Intermediate Series, also known as the Nadi Shodhana or "nerve cleansing" series, represents a pivotal stage in the traditional Ashtanga yoga practice. Building upon the foundation established in the Primary Series (Yoga Chikitsa), the Intermediate Series introduces more challenging postures, deeper internal work, and a focus on refining strength, flexibility, and internal awareness. This detailed review aims to unpack the

nuances of this series, exploring its philosophy, structure, benefits, challenges, and practical considerations for practitioners.

Understanding the Context and Philosophy of the Intermediate Series

The Evolution of Ashtanga Yoga Practice

Ashtanga Yoga, founded by Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, follows a fixed sequence of postures linked by vinyasa, emphasizing breath, bandhas, and drishti. It is traditionally practiced in a prescribed order, progressing through the Primary, Intermediate, and Advanced Series.

The Intermediate Series serves as a bridge between the foundational Primary Series and the more advanced poses of the Advanced Series. It emphasizes:

- Deepening internal purification
- Developing core strength and stability
- Enhancing flexibility in the back, hips, and hamstrings
- Refining bandhas and pranayama techniques
- Preparing the practitioner for the demands of advanced postures

Philosophical Underpinnings

The Intermediate Series aligns with the yogic goal of Nadi Shodhana, or nerve cleansing, aiming to purify the nervous system and facilitate the flow of prana (life energy). The series focuses on:

- Removing energetic blockages
- Balancing the nervous system
- Cultivating mental steadiness and concentration
- Developing internal awareness and discipline

Practicing this series is not solely about physical prowess but also about fostering a deeper connection with the internal currents of energy and breath.

Structural Overview of the Intermediate Series

Sequence and Key Postures

The Intermediate Series comprises approximately 15-20 postures, with variations depending on tradition and teacher. Some of the core asanas include:

- Navasana (Boat Pose): Development of core stability
- Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose): Hip opener
- Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend): Flexibility of hamstrings and inner thighs
- Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose): Deep forward bend with external rotation
- Supta Kurmasana (Reclining Tortoise): Advanced forward fold with binding
- Samasthiti Series (Standing Poses): Variations emphasizing balance and strength
- Standing Backbends: Urdhva Dhanurasana (Wheel), among others
- Dropbacks and Urdhva Dhanurasana variations: Backbend mastery
- Additional poses: Including some inversions and seated postures that deepen internal engagement

Progression and Pacing

The Intermediate Series is typically practiced after mastery of the Primary Series, with a gradual progression through poses. The pacing involves:

- Maintaining vinyasa flow
- Linking breath with movement
- Emphasizing internal focus over speed
- Using bandhas and drishti to deepen concentration

Practitioners usually spend several months or even years mastering each posture before moving to the next, emphasizing quality over quantity.

Technical and Practical Aspects of the Intermediate Series

Breath and Vinyasa

The breath (Ujjayi) and vinyasa are central to the series:

- Ujjayi breath: Maintains internal heat, cultivates focus, and creates a rhythmic flow
- Vinyasa: Synchronization of breath and movement, enhancing internal awareness

Practicing with mindful breath control helps in managing the intensity of advanced postures and maintains energy flow.

Bandhas and Drishti

The series intensifies the engagement of the Mula Bandha (root lock), Uddiyana Bandha (abdominal lock), and Jalandhara Bandha (throat lock). These bandhas:

- Stabilize the core
- Redirect energy inward
- Support the physical postures and internal work

Similarly, the drishti (gaze point) remains fixed to foster concentration and mindfulness.

Preparation and Conditioning

Due to the complexity of certain postures, preparation is crucial:

- Regular practice of the Primary Series to build flexibility and strength
- Gentle stretching and strengthening exercises outside the sequence
- Progressive work on backbends and hip openers
- Mindful attention to alignment and breathing mechanics

Benefits of the Intermediate Series

Physical Benefits

- Enhanced Flexibility: Deeper hip, hamstring, and spine openness
- Increased Strength: Core, back, and leg strength from demanding postures
- Balance and Stability: Improved proprioception and muscular control
- Posture and Alignment: Better awareness of body mechanics

Internal and Energetic Benefits

- Nervous System Cleansing: Purification of nerves and channels
- Prana Flow: Increased vitality and energetic balance
- Mental Clarity: Greater focus, concentration, and calmness
- Preparation for Advanced Poses: Building resilience and mastery

Emotional and Psychological Benefits

- Cultivation of discipline and perseverance
- Deepening self-awareness and acceptance
- Development of patience in mastering challenging postures

Challenges and Considerations in Practice

Physical Demands and Risks

- The series introduces demanding postures that require patience and proper technique
- Risks include overstretching, injury, or strain if practiced improperly
- Important to progress gradually under qualified supervision

Mindset and Mental Challenges

- The intensity can lead to frustration or impatience
- Developing mental resilience and equanimity is essential
- Emphasis on consistent practice rather than perfection

Prerequisites and Recommendations

- Adequate mastery of the Primary Series
- Flexibility and strength in hips, hamstrings, and back
- Guidance from experienced teachers
- Listening to the body's signals and avoiding pushing beyond limits

Practical Tips for Practicing the Intermediate Series

- Consistency is Key: Regular daily practice fosters progress
- Warm-up Thoroughly: Prepare the body for demanding postures
- Use Props and Modifications: Support during deep stretches or binds
- Focus on Breath and Bandhas: Maintain internal awareness
- Patience and Persistence: Accept that mastery takes time
- Seek Qualified Instruction: Ensure proper alignment and safety
- Integrate Meditation and Pranayama: Complement physical work with internal practices

Conclusion: Embracing the Journey of the Intermediate Series

The Ashtanga Yoga Intermediate Series offers a profound opportunity for practitioners to deepen their physical, energetic, and mental disciplines. Far from being merely a sequence of challenging postures, it embodies a holistic approach to internal purification and growth. Embracing this series requires patience, humility, and dedication, but the rewards—greater vitality, resilience, and inner peace—are well worth the effort.

For those committed to the path, the Intermediate Series serves as a vital stepping stone towards mastery, ultimately preparing the practitioner for the profound depths of the Advanced Series. With mindful practice, guidance, and respect for the body's signals, this stage of Ashtanga yoga can become a transformative journey into the self.

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