

THE *slow yoga* REVOLUTION

Lucy Greeves steps back from the fast-moving yoga trends to see what taking your time does to this ancient practice



Bhujangasana (Cobra pose)

“Yoga’s not about touching your toes, it’s about what you learn on the way down” Judith Hanson Lasater

WHenever I have the privilege of teaching someone their very first yoga class, I ask what brought them here. A few years ago, the goal was often a lean, toned body, or an effortless headstand: I’ll admit that when I started doing yoga in my early twenties, those were my priorities too. But these days, looking good in Lycra seldom comes up. Instead, a growing number of people tell me that they are struggling to stay calm. They want to be less anxious and have more self-esteem. They want to gently address the symptoms of diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer. Or they simply want to age more gracefully: to hold the stiffness at bay, and stay mobile.

It took me years to learn what many of my students now seem to understand from the start: that yoga is an experience, not a performance. And the surest way to make that shift, from outer appearance to inner experience?

Slow down. Right down.

So-called ‘slow yoga’ has always been there, but it’s having a moment right now – finding itself relevant to modern life in new and unprecedented ways. One of the leading lights of slow yoga in the UK is Uma Dinsmore-Tuli. “This is the needful time for such things: for yoga practices that honour how the student feels inside.

Because there’s an epidemic of exhaustion, insomnia, lack of nurture and nourishment.” Today’s yoga students are much more clued up about its potential to treat issues like anxiety, depression and insomnia, and they’re actively looking for classes that address their needs. “They know they’re tired, but they’re also wired. People have lost the ability to move out of their anxiety and into present being.”

As a profession, yoga teaching has made huge strides in recent years. We’re now seeing the benefit of decades of fruitful dialogue between yoga and other healing modalities, such as osteopathy and psychotherapy. The result is an ever-improving level of understanding among yoga teachers about how to use yoga as mind-body therapy. They are queuing up to learn slow yoga methods like restorative yoga and yoga nidra (explored in more detail overleaf); “we could have filled the course twice,” is a common refrain among training providers.

The good news for all of us is that slow yoga is more accessible today than ever before. There’s a quiet revolution afoot in the yoga world. Its leaders may not shout from the rooftops or court Instagram followers, but they’re out there.

Read on to find your slow yoga groove. ►



Sukhasana (Easy/pleasant pose)

Gentle Hatha Yoga

Let's say you like to move your body, and you want to see progress in terms of physical fitness; but you also want the benefits of a yoga practice that addresses the inner you. Something that looks like a regular yoga class, but feels better. There are loads of teachers all over the UK who take a student-centred approach to hatha (traditional) yoga, where you can progress at your own pace based on how your body responds.

Unfortunately, there's no central register, although the British Wheel of Yoga website is a good place to start (bwy.org.uk). Look for teachers near you who use words like "therapeutic", "gentle", "slow" or "mindful" to describe their classes. Another good guide is to find out who your teacher's teacher was. Tara Fraser, Peter Blackaby, Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, Dave Charlton and Ranju Roy are names to look out for - and if you happen to live near one of those senior teachers, lucky you.

If you can't get to a class at all, you could start with one of Tara Fraser's books - she's sold over a million copies worldwide. *Yoga for You* and *The Easy Yoga Workbook* are classics.

Some of the best slow yoga videos currently available are by Brooklyn-based J Brown, whose slogan is "Gentle is the new advanced". Stream them at jbrownयोगavideo.com.



Gomukhasana (Cow face pose)

Scaravelli-Inspired Yoga

Vanda Scaravelli is the patron saint of late starters. Born into a distinguished and very musical Italian family, she was well into her 40s when she discovered yoga, studying with BKS Iyengar and other senior hatha yoga teachers. Over the next five decades, up until her death in 1999, she developed a graceful and fluid approach to yoga that was very much her own, and which continues to inspire successive generations of teachers.

Vanda wasn't keen on methods or gurus, so there is no official "Scaravelli Yoga". Instead, teachers call themselves "Scaravelli-influenced" or "inspired". What they share is an exquisitely mindful approach that turns the smallest movement into a meditation. Classes can be light and playful, or very, very slow: the teacher might lead an exploration of a handful of poses, or you might spend half an hour just standing, experiencing the feet and the effects of gravity on the body in minute detail. As Scaravelli herself used to say, "To absorb the teaching requires infinite time and no ambition".

The rewards of this approach can be profound. Although it's gentle, strong bodies and advanced asana can blossom out of this softness. Just look at pictures of 80-year-old Vanda executing extreme backbends with poise.

For classes, try thinkfeelbe.co.uk or search for "Scaravelli-inspired". And check out Vanda Scaravelli's book, "Awakening the Spine" to get inspired yourself. ►



Balasana (Child's pose)



Savasana (Corpse pose)

Restorative Yoga

Now we're getting really slow. Pioneered by teachers like Judith Hansen Lasater, and with its origins in the yoga of BKS Iyengar, restorative yoga uses props like bolsters, belts and folded blankets to support the body in passive postures for five, ten minutes at a time - long enough to bring about deep release. It involves little or no physical exertion, and it's great for gently undoing long-held patterns of tension in the body.

Lucy Maresh teaches restorative classes and retreats at her own studio in Northumberland (aspacetobe.co.uk), and has assisted Judith Hansen Lasater with her UK teacher training. "Some of my students just laugh, because they can't believe it's so simple: that they can just put down whatever they're carrying, and experience their breath. It's so simple, it's almost funny."

Of course, simple doesn't necessarily mean easy. A restorative class asks you to be truly present, just as you are, with plenty of time to notice your physical and emotional state. For many people who struggle with anxiety or over-thinking, letting go is far more challenging than pushing the body to its limits.

Nor is restorative yoga just a cop-out for the unfit or the lazy. Lucy says, "I was drawn to restorative yoga after my son was born; I simply didn't have the energy to move. And the funny thing is, I've never been stronger. What it's taught me is that you can only really challenge yourself from a position of ease. Once you know how it feels to be in your own power, you can tackle just about anything."

To find a restorative yoga class near you, start with Judith Hansen Lasater's register of teachers at restorativeyogateachers.com.

Yoga Nidra

The slowest yoga of all in terms of physical movement, Yoga Nidra is practised lying completely still, eyes closed, for anywhere between 15 minutes and an hour. The teacher talks the students through progressive stages of relaxation, which may include visualisations and breathing cues, before gently bringing them back to a fully alert state. Although "nidra" means "sleep" in Sanskrit, that's deceptive. The point of the exercise is to reach a very deep state of body relaxation while keeping the mind alert but at rest, in a "processing" state. It's a bit like self-hypnosis, and can bring about profound changes despite the lack of outward signs of effort.

"When they practice Yoga Nidra for the first time, people feel they've finally come home," says Uma Dinsmore-Tuli, founder of the Yoga Nidra Network. "It's like a filling station for your energy levels. People feel deeply rested and restored. They feel nourished, and connected."

As a regular practice, Yoga Nidra can relieve chronic pain and profoundly improve mood. According to Uma, it gives you "More energy, better digestion, better sex, better sleep - all those functions that make you feel fully human!"

The best news is that you can try Yoga Nidra right now, at home; all you need is an internet connection and a place to lie down. Go to yoganidranetwork.org for a range of free downloads, as well as a register of qualified teachers in the UK.

Lucy Greeves is a writer and yoga teacher