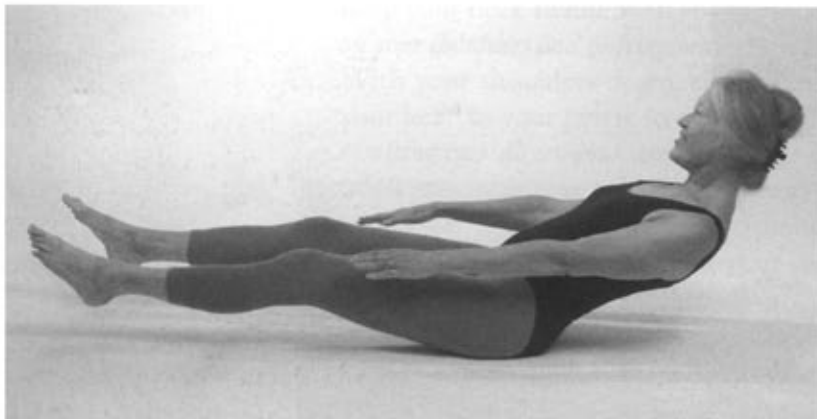


## KENTRO and Yoga

KENTRO Body Balance and yoga both focus on health and well-being. They encompass all levels of our being and develop our awareness and sense of quietude. Although the background and approach to wholeness differ significantly between KENTRO and yoga, practicing KENTRO guidelines for centered balance will enhance yoga postures.

A glance at the historical origins of yoga reveals the complementary relationship between the KENTRO method and yoga. Yoga, a Sanskrit word meaning “union,” is an orthodox system of Indian philosophy and mysticism. It was developed thousands of years ago for the disciplined practice of monks, who most likely moved with ease. The early classical writings on yoga, collected in the *Yoga Sutras* (aphorisms), were written around 200 BCE by the revered yoga master, Patanjali. These principles are described in four books, *On Concentration*, *On Practice*, *Supernormal Powers*, and *On the Self-in-Itself* (or *Liberation*). In *On Practice*, Patanjali outlines the eight pillars of yoga. One of these, *hatha* yoga, describes specialized physical postures called *asanas*.

In Sutra 46, Patanjali focuses on the fundamental qualities of *asanas*. Swami Prabhavananda translates this *sutra* to read: “Posture [*asana*] is to be seated in a position which is firm but relaxed.”<sup>5</sup> Swami Hariharananda Aranya likewise carefully translates these qualities as the “Motionless and Agreeable Form [of Staying].”<sup>6</sup> We later read that “the spine has to be



Try out this full-body toner only after many months of practicing the Boat (p. 90) and other back, pelvic, and abdominal KENTRO strengtheners.

Avoid tucking your pelvis, shortening your belly, or pushing forward your shoulders. Drop your shoulders, and relax your entire body while you are in this Boat variation, which is akin to a yoga Boat pose.

kept erect” in all yogic *asanas*.<sup>7</sup> In this *sutra*, we learn the importance of positioning our pelvis—the core-seat area of the body for unified posture. Patanjali suggests that even while standing, bending, or lying down, we have to look for a steady, smooth sense of “seat,” settling into a posture and allowing the pelvis to support the torso so that the back straightens. He elaborates on his soothing approach to *asanas* in Sutra 47. “*Asanas* are perfected,” Swami Hariharananda Aranya translates, “by Relaxation of Effort and Meditation on the Infinite.”<sup>8</sup> We are instructed that, after sitting, “the whole body should be relaxed, taking care at the same time that the body does not bend.” Likewise, “the habit of keeping the body always at rest and effortless helps the practice of *Asana*.”<sup>9</sup>

Stability, centering, relaxation, and comfort are actually the principal feelings generated by KENTRO practice, beginning in the pelvic area and echoing throughout the entire body. However, unlike *hatha* yoga, there are no postures or philosophical requirements in the KENTRO program. All that is necessary is a willingness to caringly practice specific movements, which shift us into ease during our activities. Elemental Placement prepares the way for each KENTRO movement, focusing on continuous placement

of our pelvis into centered balance so our torso can be erect without taxing the body. Students report that, over time, the pelvis begins to feel like a mobile, steady seat while they are standing, bending, and sitting down.

KENTRO guidelines were developed over a period of fifteen years. Balance (defined as optimal bone support and weight distribution of the body), interwoven with centering (experienced as release of strain in the soft tissues), influences all areas of our being, as our bodies reshape themselves into spirited posture and free movement. This suppleness can be incorporated into yoga postures to embody the ancient belief in freedom from physical exertion for spiritual development described by Patanjali.

I first noticed the relationship between agreeable balance and hatha yoga postures when I tried to sense balance in the yoga postures I learned at the Paris Iyengar and Aplomb Institutes. At the time I was not yet familiar with Patanjali's aphorisms, and I did not feel even an inkling of relief from stiffness while practicing these asanas. Because I had already begun to sense dynamic peacefulness in my everyday actions, I believed I could somehow blend this quality into formal postures.

What Patanjali describes as stable, enjoyable postures I later recognized in ancient Indian sculptures and miniature paintings depicting men, women, gods, and goddesses in balanced asanas during ordinary activities. I saw the same poise in contemporary Indian films and photographs.

Little by little, as I transformed my body, I was able to discern when a yoga student struggled or moved softly into a stance. I noticed Indian yoga instructors who became frustrated because they could not communicate their physical flexibility to Western students with excessively tightened musculature. However, the dedication to yoga I found in many Western students inspired me to revisit certain yoga poses, this time with the intent of merging asanas with comfort and centering movement.

I gradually developed a series of movements that were helpful for yoga postural placement. I encouraged yoga students to *sense* their movements and rest their bodies into placement instead of rigorously imitating their teachers. Yoga instructors who studied with me commented that even simple bodily shifts, such as bending the knees instead of locking them while bending forward, increased their plasticity.

Contemporary Western hatha yoga instructors honor Patanjali's writings whenever they emphasize the supportive placement of the pelvis and encourage students to slow down their motions. In general, however, the principles presented by Patanjali have become significantly abstracted from yoga practice, since most of us who explore yoga move out of *comfortable, centered* balance. Certain yoga postures and even prolonged sitting and bending during daily occupations may feel like chores because we feel stiff and uncomfortable.

As in dance or the martial arts, yoga students rely on their teachers to instruct them in the right placement of asanas. Many well-known contemporary hatha yoga masters, who have reflected on and respect the complexities of yoga, interpret the

words of Patanjali according to their own experiences and language. There are a myriad of approaches to posture found in hatha yoga.

Hatha yoga instructors vary from being reassuring to being exacting in their approaches, but all instructors systematically teach the same postures, which do not vary structurally. They incorporate breathing techniques and are practiced in a quiet space. The yoga student can choose which of the many approaches to yoga she prefers, but she will have to conform to the basic form of every *asana*. The *asanas* tend to be progressive and sequential.

*Yet how can a yoga student who experiences physical distress—and who is already struggling to position her body “correctly”—apply these yoga principles and integrate Patanjali’s empowering recommendations?* It is difficult for her to do so if she does not see comfortable physical balance in the instructor. Even if the yoga instructor moves in fluid balance, students may have trouble experiencing less tension because there are no traditional, specific hatha yoga guidelines that sharpen the senses, enabling them to distinguish strain from ease and to dissolve years of stressful postural patterns.

The KENTRO approach to well-being sheds light on how we can move with resiliency:

- There is no concept of effort.
- There is no discipline; there are no *shoulds*.
- We focus on enlivening the senses, expanding our perceptions, and enjoying our gestures.
- The vital ingredient for KENTRO practice is an affectionate relationship with the body.
- By celebrating our nature, we celebrate all nature.
- KENTRO guidelines can help yoga instructors and students approach postures in a relaxed manner, moving toward Patanjali’s description of comfort.

Basic aspects of the KENTRO program can be smoothly integrated into hatha yoga practice, even when students have hurried and complex lives. Yoga students can then honor the ancient, highly structured *asana* patterns that aim at both progression and unity, while learning how to avoid forcing their body into a superficial, fixed form. By moving safely into a challenging posture, postures will be flavored by releases.

Centering guidelines prepares students to experience yoga postures in a completely new and creative way, embodying Patanjali’s descriptions of postures without constraint. Balancing actions feel like expansive, gentle stretches. When yoga students integrate such feelings into a physical stance, they perceive the structured yoga pattern in a freer way.

There are no advanced KENTRO movements; all are equally valuable. With practice, the movements are felt on a deeper level as the benefits broaden. By practicing KENTRO, the students’ concern over slow progress will be replaced by a subtler perception of yoga—that of enjoying even simple *asanas*.

Attentiveness to our automatic inhalation and exhalation improves our ability to amplify a muscular stretch. In Sutra 49, Patanjali advises us that, “When Asana is Perfected, Regulation of the Flow of Inhalation and Exhalation [results in] Pranayama (Breath Control).<sup>10</sup> Postural quality precedes breath control in yoga. The KENTRO emphasis on regaining physical spaciousness promotes smoother breathing—useful preparation for yoga breathing techniques combined with gently balanced postures.

Physical mobility entails increased volume in the rib cage and abdomen, as well as improved functioning of basic life systems, such as respiration. The torso broadens; muscles become more elastic. Breath becomes a natural component of an expanding and lengthening stretch in the torso (see Vignette 14, *Breathing Up Your Back*).

There is no particular sequence of KENTRO movements because (a) we can decide which area of our body we wish to limber and strengthen; and (b) the activity (e.g., sweeping the patio) itself defines which movements we will experience. Such common sense concepts can help yoga students confidently choose yoga postures that feel appropriate for home practice.

In turn, postures will not be forced or static because the students will feel more flowing motion. They can then experience the “motionless staying,” described in Sutra 46 as continuous, tiny bodily readjustments that create robust relaxation.

KENTRO practice does not require a secluded place because *all* activities—sorting laundry or doing construction work—are places for practice. The resulting limberness in our repetitive gestures allows gentler balancing in yoga postures; leisurely daily movements develop into soothing daily *asanas*.

KENTRO movements offer vital benefits to those who practice yoga postures; they generate the formless, sensuous release that Patanjali describes as fundamental to yoga postures. As our body lets go of tension, it can reshape itself without mental discipline or unnecessary physical effort. Instead of striving and pushing our body to conform to “correct,” idealized, or superficial poses, we can gently feel our way into any occupation or *asana*.

*Everyday* posture extends into *specific* yoga postures. KENTRO guidelines can be thought of as yoga for daily life, in which we focus on harmony in humble, repetitive actions. Our powerful creative core then generates a lovely ease.

Centered balance in everyday and specialized activities alters how we experience our bodies. Agitated movements become more restful, soulful movements. When we feel such exhilarating shifts, yoga postural forms act as a fine guide, not a rigid boundary. By sensing flow in ordinary gestures, we gradually expand into the flow of a posture.

As we move from the inside out, at our own rhythm, we can find in each *asana* a hospitable, unifying shelter.