

Yoga and Undulation

Pantajuli's Yoga Sutra I.50

Samskara sktksaaranat purva jati jnanam

“When experiencing this absolute true knowledge, all previous samskaras (impressions) are left behind and new ones are prevented from sprouting.”

Translation by Nischala Devi in *The Secret Power of Yoga*

Work. Eat. Sleep.

Eat. Work. Eat. Sleep.

Practice. Work. Eat. Sleep.

Unconscious (i.e., “normal”) living creates deep grooves of conditioning and habits in the layers of our being, called samskara. The practice of yoga brings light to our conditioning and makes it possible to transform these grooves, but that doesn't stop samskara from creeping into yoga practice. Tools to create awareness and stay present are needed for every aspect of life—even on the mat or cushion.

Patterning, and therefore limitation, is built into the human way of learning. It's natural for the nervous and musculoskeletal systems to lay down a track of movement that eventually becomes a rut. For example, getting out of the car entails lifting an arm, twisting the body, putting a foot on the ground, then contracting muscles to stand. Nine times out of ten, the body follows the exact same sequence to get out of the car (or off the bike or up from a chair). The same is true for a forward bend. One part of the body initiates the movement—out of habit—and sets up a predetermined sequence of follow through.

That's one reason why a yoga teacher is so valuable. S/he gives valuable cues, brings awareness to tendencies we don't notice, and strengthens attention and relationship with the current environment. In addition, attending classes and workshops provides variety in practice and that lays down new tracks of conditioning.

Unconscious movement requires samskara and creates even deeper ruts of habit. How can we make every forward bend, warrior pose, headstand, and meditation a conscious, fresh experience?

The first step is awareness. Become fully present, with the pose and yourself, and notice flow or lack of movement without the desire to change anything. The organic nature of your body will respond to your awareness with subtle transformations. Stay present and you will automatically create new tracks of being.

The second step is breath, which creates opening from the inside. However, breath is powerfully affected by samskara, as the diaphragm holds the pattern of our life

experiences and beliefs. Pranayama, with or without asana, can resolve long-held breathing imbalances and establish large-scale transformation.

An innovative technique you can use to stay present in your practice is undulation. Undulation is an unstructured, body-directed, fluid movement. Undulation is the exact opposite of the effortful, rigid, and mind-centered movement that dominates our lives and occasionally our practice. Here's a sample.

- From a seated position, sway from side to side. As much as you can, let the movement flow all the way up and down your spine from the tailbone to the base of your skull and back.
- Notice what parts of your body naturally respond to this movement.
- Notice where the movement is stuck or absent.
- Come back to upright and begin again, but this time initiate from one of the stuck places so that it leads and the rest of the spine follows. The movement will be different: small or uncoordinated maybe. That's OK. Just follow what happens.
- Try again from another stuck place.
- Now from the beginning sway from side to side. Notice how gentle movement has lubricated your spine, improved the flow, and naturally changed your habit of side bending.

More challenging undulations can help you discover and change conditioning of the deep spine and viscera. Whether simple or complex, undulations focus on the present to create organic, fluid motion that dissolves the ruts of conditioning and transforms samskara without creating resistance.

If you are in an asana and find yourself responding in a habitual way, introduce a simple, small undulation—a flow through your body from foot to hand or tail to head—and notice how it helps you make the small adjustment that leads from resistance to acceptance to transformation.

Working with our fluid, organic nature is a big step toward truth (Sanskrit: sat) and connection to the rest of the universe as it is. The more organic we become, the less likely we are to fall into the ruts of mechanical, unconscious movement.

If you want to learn more about fluid movements to nourish your spine, visit www.undulationexercise.com, which includes audio and video samples. Written by Anita Boser, LMP, CHP, author of *Relieve Stiffness and Feel Young Again with Undulation* (print) and *Undulation Exercises* (audio). She is currently in Viniyoga teacher training.