

# **The Mind and the Crow: Using the PETTLEP Model of Imagery Intervention in a Yoga Learning Scenario**

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*The following is a case study on the use the PETTLEP model of imagery intervention in a yoga practice situation. The purpose of the study was to examine whether an imagery intervention based on the PETTLEP model would prove effective for this type of skill-based physical activity. The PETTLEP model is a framework for helping instructors and coaches structure interventions for performance enhancement in motor skills activities. The following paper presents the background of the PETTLEP framework and how it informed the present study. It also describes the methods that were used to develop and implement the intervention, as well as a discussion of the results. The paper ends with a reflection by the author on the impact of the PETTLEP model on her yoga instruction and practice.*

## ***Introduction***

The practice of yoga is an art and science dedicated to creating union between body, mind and spirit. Its objective is to assist the practitioner in using the breath and body to foster an awareness of ourselves as individualized beings intimately connected to the unified whole of creation. In short it is about creating balance so as to live in peace, good health and harmony with the greater whole. This art of right living was perfected and practiced in India thousands of years ago, and the foundations of yoga philosophy were written down in *The Yoga Sutra* of Pantanjali approximately 200 AD. This sacred text describes the inner workings of the mind and provides an eight-step blueprint for controlling its restlessness so as to instill lasting peace.

Yoga has the power to unlock the hidden potential in the body and mind but that does not mean the potential for damage does not exist. Accidents and injuries are possible in every yoga class, and instructors must be aware and take steps to minimize these problems. Injuries can happen in any given class but instructors should take particular care in beginner classes. Students are often unfamiliar with particular movements and have the potential to push themselves too far, fall from an unstable position, or try to compete with the practitioner on the next mat. I have spoken to beginner students who tell me they feel fluid and strong, mentally willing and able to practice yoga. They often look up to see their teacher demonstrate a particular asana and will try to follow in perfect imitation. The teacher moves into the asana with ease and grace and they start to think they might be able to do it the same way. As they are attempting to get into the posture, the possibilities of what they thought they might be capable of suddenly crumble in just a few seconds and they are unable to keep the control over the strength in their body and/or access the needed flexibility in their limbs. As a result, they fall out of position, potentially injuring themselves in the process. Moreover, failure to achieve a pose in a class setting can often leave students feeling defeated, ashamed and frustrated.

As an instructor, I need to be aware of what my students are doing in my class at all times. While teaching yoga, the number one priority is the safety of my students, rather than my own practice. Often, if needed, I demonstrate a particular position, then come out of the position to observe my students. I also move around the room, if all of the students are not visible, and I try to keep class sizes small enough to feel comfortable watching everyone. Class skill levels are important to remember when planning a lesson, and I try to be particularly careful with beginners and midlevel students. In each lesson, I also try to recognize the potential for injury in each position or transition. Some asana/postures lend themselves more to injuries, when you force your body into any position if not performed correctly. Pulled hamstrings, for example, are a common type of injury in yoga, usually caused by overstretching in a seated or standing forward bend. Before moving into different postures, I instruct students to stretch slowly, accepting the limits of their practice while still emphasizing the correct fullness of proper form. Also, I remind them to listen to their bodies In order to achieve the

most benefits and reduce their chance of injury. In terms of safety, this is the most important principle, developing an awareness of how the body feels as during practice.

Yoga's emphasis on balance in mind and body makes it well suited for developing mental skills like imagery. Imagery, also called visualization, is a mental technique that involves creating an experience from memory to imitate a real one (Williams, Cooley, Newell, Weibull, & Cumming, 2013). The goal of imagery in a performance situation is to rehearse the steps involved in the performance so as to have a mental model of what that performance will look and feel like. Wakefield and Smith (2012) note that imagery is often mentioned in sport psychology and self-help literature as a key psychological skill for athletes. Imagery is a mental habit that many people do in a variety of situations but it is also a mental skill that can be particularly useful in helping people prepare for physical challenges. As a skill, imagery can be taught and developed by coaches and instructors to help their students practice the mental portions of their physical performances.

Holmes and Collins (2001) developed a model to help coaches and instructors structure imagery interventions with students and athletes. The model, PETTLEP is comprised of a seven-point checklist representing seven key points or elements of an effective imagery intervention. The seven elements are: Physical, Environment, Task, Timing, Learning, Emotion, and Perspective. The seven elements are meant to guide coaches and instructors as they develop imagery scripts that they can use with their students. Physical and Environment stress the importance of mentally simulating muscle movements and making the location of the intervention as real as possible. Task, Timing, and Learning are related to the skill level, pace, and degree of challenge for the intervention in relation to the needs and abilities of the student. Finally, Emotion and Perspective are related to the emotions that are a part of skill-based physical activity and the importance of helping the student imagine the experience from their own viewpoint as much as possible.

I believe that imagery is a mental skill that goes well with yoga practice. To test this belief, I designed an imagery intervention for a particular yoga student that I frequently work with in beginner level classes. My goal was to help this student visualize a particular pose that has proven challenging

to him in the past. The rest of this paper details my experiences in leading an imagery intervention with a single yoga student in my studio. The exact details of the script I used for my intervention are included in an attached appendix.

### ***Method***

For my imagery intervention, I selected my subject Tom because I have worked with him before. I knew him from classes I have taught and was aware of his skill level. Tom is also an older male so I thought that he might have problems and concerns that are common with older people when it comes to flexibility and movement. Tom has been working with me frequently over the past few months so I was aware of a particular yoga posture that he wished to master but was having difficulty executing in regular class sessions.

I conducted the intervention at the yoga studio where we both practice. Tom and I met there at a time between classes so there weren't any other yogis around. Conducting the intervention at the studio met the criteria for the Environment element of the PETTLEP model because it was where we usually practiced together and therefore contained all the environmental conditions of a normal practice session. I had printed out my script ahead of time and used it during the intervention. With Tom's permission, I also used my Galaxy Note phone to record our imagery session, as well as our reflection period after the session was over.

For the first imagery intervention, I spoke with Tom before hand about poses that he would like to master. I knew of one in particular and had prepared a script for the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose ahead of time. I suggested we try an imagery activity together and he agreed. After the intervention was over, I asked him to reflect on the experience and tell me his impressions. After our session together was over, I took the recording of the intervention home and made some notes. After one week, I asked Tom if he would be willing to meet again and try the activity one more time. We met at the studio, where I conducted the intervention with a revised script. I also included a visual aid to help Tom get a sense of the posture before we began.

## ***Results***

I conducted my imagery intervention with Tom twice. The first time, Tom seemed surprised and amused by the activity. He had expressed his desire to be able to master the pose and we talked for some time about what makes the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose challenging for beginner students. He mentioned several times that his upper body did not feel strong enough to give him enough balance to stay in the pose for even a short time. After the intervention, he told me that it was helpful for him to imagine how it felt to stay balanced at the final form of the pose. He said he had always worried before that he would not be able to hold the pose for very long. It seemed like he already had a image of himself not being able to do the pose, and that this was a very hard image to overcome.

After this reflection, I felt I needed to emphasize how Tom might feel when he was being successful in each of the different stages of the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose. There are different parts to reaching the final form of the pose and I realized I could help him feel more confident if I told him to imagine reaching each stage successfully. I decided to reword parts of my intervention to include how Tom should be feeling as he imagined performing the pose. I also wanted to improve my delivery. I thought my voice sounded too sleepy and this was maybe not the best tone for inspiring an emotional response to my PETTLEP intervention. I decided for the next intervention that I would not pause as much between sentences and try to establish the same regular tone I use when I am teaching a class.

When I met Tom the next week for the second recitation, he seemed more prepared and more serious. He told me he had tried the imagery intervention on his own, although he still was not able to hold his position in the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose. I asked him if I could record our session together and he agreed. We sat on the floor of the studio again but this time we did not discuss the challenges of the pose. I simply let him breathe deeply for a couple of minutes without trying to imagine anything. I then asked him to clear his mind and breathe the same way he would for a regular yoga session. I then led him through the intervention. He did not smile as much as he did the first time and seemed to concentrate more. After I had gone through the script, I asked him to reflect silently for a couple of minutes before we talked to each other about the experience.

Tom said that he felt the second intervention was more intense than the first. I asked him why and he said that he had thought about his mental attitude towards different yoga postures all week. He told me he frequently thought about his age during practice and how he had gotten used to not being able to do certain poses. He said he realized that yoga could be just as much a mental exercise as it was a physical one. I also felt the second intervention was more successful. We both seemed more focused on the intervention and on doing it seriously. When Tom told me he was still unable to hold the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose in a normal yoga class, I felt like I had not guided him properly. This feeling may have helped me take the intervention more seriously and with a better sense of purpose.

### ***Discussion***

As stated earlier, the purpose of the study was to examine whether an imagery intervention based on the PETTLEP model would prove effective for this type of skill-based physical activity. Based on my experience with Tom, I would say that imagery interventions in yoga practice situations can be effective. It is my experience that many yoga students focus on the physical aspects of yoga practice and do not take into account the mental aspects. It is true that there are often meditation periods in a yoga practice but these usually take place at the beginning and the end of a yoga practice session. I think teaching yoga students to develop mental skills such as imagery can help them find more balance in their practice and possibly help them reduce their risk of injury. When I reflected with him after the second intervention, I noticed that Tom seemed more confident when he talked about the possibility of doing the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose in a regular yoga practice session. It seemed like in his mind, he had already done the pose before. I then realized that this could be a very powerful tool to improve my own practice. I sometimes get nervous before I teach a class. I worry that the students won't respond to the way I have structured the lesson, or that they will present some type of skill challenge that I won't be ready for. I have since started to do my own imagery exercises at home before I teach a class. Most surprising, I can tell my emotional response to teaching is different when I have tried to rehearse ahead of time with imagery. I feel more relaxed and in control, which is important for a yoga instructor leading a class of 15 people. Yoga students want to feel like their

instructor is both in charge and responsive to their needs. Before using imagery for my own practice, I feel like I was concentrating more on the control aspect of my practice. Now I feel like I have already taught the lesson before I even begin. I have already covered any mistakes I might make and am ready to respond more to the needs of my students. I now realize that although yoga emphasizes muscle memory and physical practice, preparing my mind and the minds of my students for the challenges they face in class is equally important. In this way, I believe helping students and instructor develop techniques for improving their mental skills is a valuable part of achieving the yogic balance of mind and body.

Holmes, P. S., & Collins, D. J. (2001). The PETTLEP approach to motor imagery: A functional equivalence model for sport psychologists. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 13*(1), 60-83.

Wakefield, C., & Smith, D. (2012). Perfecting Practice: Applying the PETTLEP Model of Motor Imagery. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 3*(1), 1–11.

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Williams, S. E., Cooley, S. J., Newell, E., Weibull, F., & Cumming, J. (2013). Seeing the Difference: Developing Effective Imagery Scripts for Athletes. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 4*(2), 109–121. <http://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2013.781560>

#### Appendix A – Final PETTLEP Intervention Script for the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose

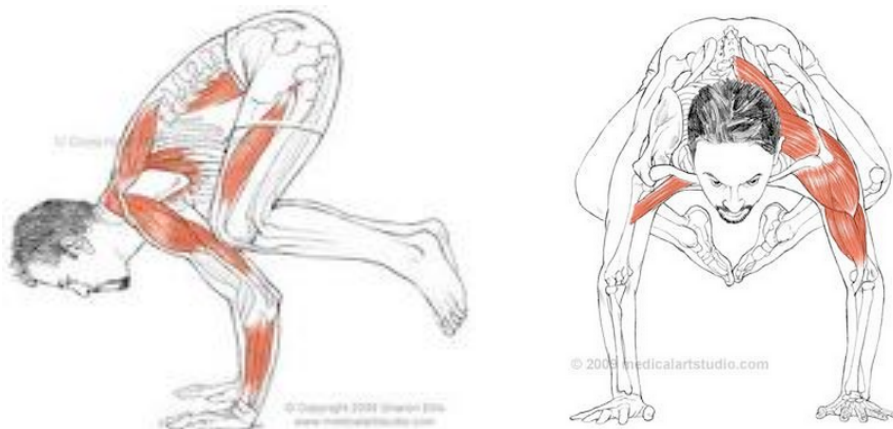


Figure 1. Visual aid for Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose

I want to guide you now through the Bakasana/Crane/Crow pose. This asana strengthens the arms and the abdominal organs since the latter are contracted. Close your eyes and imagine you are starting this posture from the Tadasana /Mountain pose. Squat down from Tadasana /Mountain pose with your inner feet a few inches apart. Separate your knees wider than your hips and lean the torso forward, between the inner thighs. Feel yourself stretch your arms forward, then bend your elbows, and place your hands on the floor and the backs of the upper arms against the shins. Imagine you can feel the weight and balance of your body on hands and shins.

Remember, the foundation for this pose is head and hands to shoulders. Breathe deep and imagine you can place your hands flat in front of you on the floor as if you were in Downward Facing Dog. Feel the position of your hand, your middle finger pointing forward and with your fingers spread.

Now snuggle your inner thighs against the sides of your torso, and your shins into your armpits, and slide the upper arms down as low onto the shins as possible. Imagine you can feel your weight in balance as you lift up onto the balls of your feet and lean forward even more, taking the weight of your torso onto the backs of the upper arms. Now feel your front torso contract as you round your back completely. Visualize your balance as you keep your tailbone as close to your heels as possible.

You are now close to final position. Exhale and lean forward even more onto the backs of your upper arms, to the point where the balls of your feet leave the floor. Now your torso and legs are balanced on the backs of your upper arms. You are breathing deeply and regularly, as you stay perched securely on your bent arms. Stay for about 5/10 breaths all the time pressing firmly through the hands to feel the rebound lift.

You feel totally in control and are now ready to make your transition. You begin to release, exhaling slowly as you lower your feet to the floor, come back into a squat position. You feel strong and flexible as you realize this posture is now yours to perform whenever you wish.