

NAFTA

YOGA FLOW/YOGA LEVEL I

MANUAL



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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS YOGA?

As we have said, yoga is an ancient Indian philosophy that enhances personal growth and wellbeing. Although it is a systemic philosophical approach, yoga is not a religion, but complementary with most spiritual paths.

The physical aspect of Yoga (*Hatha Yoga*) use poses and focused breathing, requiring concentration and discipline. The result is a greater union of mind, body and spirit. Anyone, regardless of body type, age, experience, or physical abilities, can practice yoga.

Pop culture would have us believe that yoga involves contorting your body into uncomfortable positions while staring at a candle and breathing incense. You will see that yoga is much more than that. It is a series of exercises that can be done by almost all people - not just the young who are in shape and healthy. Yoga can be performed by senior citizens, disabled people, and even children.

Yoga is a tool for gaining body-mind awareness to enhance whatever spiritual/religious beliefs you have. A yoga session will leave you feeling energized and relaxed. You will work your muscles and will properly align your bones; you will breathe deeply, oxygenating the lungs and blood; you will experience true deep relaxation.

By bringing awareness to the body, and working the muscles, you are able to more deeply relax them than from any other form of exercise. You will gain a deeper appreciation of your body and mind through yoga in a way that no other exercise program will.

People who have done no physical exercise at all, as well as Olympic athletes, find enormous benefits from Yoga. The foundation of traditional yoga is careful alignment of your body as you hold the poses. This precision and the awareness that comes with it, leads to tremendous growth, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

As in all great arts and sciences, to become proficient in yoga requires effort, determination, and practice. But then, the fruit we reap is always in proportion to the seeds we sow and nurture. Thus, if you are looking for a quick fix, an instant cure, a quelling of surface symptoms while the true ailment remains unhealed, you will not find satisfaction in yoga.

On the other hand, if you want to keep or regain your health, vitality and vigor; if you want to feel younger and stronger; and if you are looking for a perfectly balanced and complete form of exercise that can be started by anyone

over seven years of age, in any condition, and which becomes more challenging as you get more advanced, yoga is for you!

There are many benefits of a regular yoga practice. Not only does yoga help maintain a healthy lifestyle, but it also clears your mind and provide clarity of focus - something we all could use from time to time! Let us look at the benefits of yoga.

CHAPTER 2

WHY DO YOGA?

Yoga Creates both flexibility and strength along with cardiovascular health. It creates mental clarity and focus and emotional balance. Yoga is safe for all ages and body types. It facilitates healing from injuries and is a wonderful way to create wellness.

You weight train to gain strength, jog or do aerobics for a cardiovascular workout, practice tai-chi to develop a sense of balance and harmony, stretch to gain flexibility, and meditate to develop peace of mind and relaxation. Yoga is a form of exercise that gives you everything: strength, endurance, balance, flexibility, and relaxation. It is the only complete form of bodywork that does it all. Indeed, yoga is more than stretching and relaxation: it is the ultimate mind- body challenge.

Yoga increases flexibility as it offers positions that act upon the various joints of the body including those joints that aren't always in the forefront of notice ability. These joints are rarely exercised, however, with yoga, they are!

Various yoga positions exercise the different tendons and ligaments of the body. The body that may have been quite rigid begins experiencing a remarkable flexibility in even those parts which have not been consciously worked upon. Seemingly unrelated non-strenuous yoga positions act upon certain parts of the body in an interrelated manner. When done together, they work in harmony to create a situation where flexibility is attained relatively easily.

Yoga is perhaps the only form of activity which massages all the internal glands and organs of the body in a thorough manner, including those - such as the prostate - that hardly get externally stimulated during our entire lifetime. Yoga acts in a wholesome manner on the various body parts. This stimulation and massage of the organs in turn benefits us by keeping away disease and providing a forewarning at the first possible instance of a likely onset of disease or disorder.

By gently stretching muscles and joints as well as massaging the various organs, yoga ensures the optimum blood supply to various parts of the body. This helps in the flushing out of toxins from every nook and cranny as well as providing nourishment up to the last point. This leads to benefits such as delayed ageing, energy and a remarkable zest for life.

But these enormous physical benefits are just a "side effect" of this powerful practice. What yoga does is harmonize the mind with the body. This results in real quantum benefits. It is now an open secret that the will of the mind

has enabled people to achieve extraordinary physical feats, which proves beyond doubt the mind and body connection.

Yoga through meditation works remarkably to achieve this harmony and helps the mind work in sync with the body. How often do we find that we are unable to perform our activities properly and in a satisfying manner because of the confusions and conflicts in our mind weigh down heavily upon us? Moreover, stress which in reality is the #1 killer affecting all parts of our physical, endocrinal and emotional systems can be corrected through the wonderful yoga practice of meditation.

In fact, yoga = meditation, because both work together in achieving the common goal of unity of mind, body and spirit - a state of eternal bliss.

The meditative practices through yoga help in achieving an emotional balance through detachment. What it means is that meditation creates conditions, where you are not affected by the happenings around you. This in turn creates a remarkable calmness and a positive outlook, which also has tremendous benefits on the physical health of the body.

There's no doubt that yoga has tremendous benefits to your health and well-being. So how do you get started with your own yoga program? Let us look at the basic styles of yoga and what they mean.

CHAPTER 3

WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

In ancient times yoga was often referred to as a tree, a living entity with roots, a trunk, branches, blossoms, and fruit. Hatha yoga is one of six branches; the others include raja, karma, bhakti, jnana, and tantra yoga. Each branch with its unique characteristics and function represents a particular approach to life. Some people may find one particular branch more inviting than another. However, it is important to note that involvement in one of these paths does not preclude activity in any of the others, and in fact you will find many paths naturally overlapping.

Raja Yoga

Raja means "royal," and meditation is the focal point of this branch of yoga. This approach involves strict adherence to the eight "limbs" of yoga as outlined by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*. Also found in many other branches of yoga, these limbs, or stages, follow this order: ethical standards, *yama*; self-discipline, *niyama*; posture, *asana*; breath extension or control, *pranayama*; sensory withdrawal, *pratyahara*; concentration, *dharana*; meditation, *dhyana*; and ecstasy or final liberation, *samadhi*.

Raja yoga attracts individuals who are introspective and drawn to meditation. Members of religious orders and spiritual communities devote themselves to this branch of yoga. However, even though this path suggests a monastic or contemplative lifestyle, entering an ashram or monastery is not a prerequisite to practicing raja yoga.

Karma Yoga

The next branch is that of karma yoga or the path of service, and none of us can escape this pathway. The principle of karma yoga is that what we experience today is created by our actions in the past. Being aware of this, all of our present efforts become a way to consciously create a future that frees us from being bound by negativity and selfishness.

Karma is the path of self-transcending action. We practice karma yoga whenever we perform our work and live our lives in a selfless fashion and as a way to serve others. Volunteering to serve meals in a soup kitchen or signing up for a stint with the Peace Corps or Habitat for Humanity are prime examples of selfless service associated with the karma yoga path.

Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti yoga describes the path of devotion. Seeing the divine in all of creation, bhakti yoga is a positive way to channel the emotions. The path of bhakti provides us with an opportunity to cultivate acceptance and tolerance for everyone we come into contact with.

Bhakti yogis express the devotional nature of their path in their every thought, word, and deed- whether they are taking out the trash or calming the anger of a loved one. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., are prime examples of bhakti yogis. The life and work of Mother Teresa epitomize the combination of the karma and bhakti yoga paths with devotional aspects of bhakti and the selfless service of karma yoga.

Joana Yoga

If we consider bhakti to be the yoga of the heart, then jnana yoga is the yoga of the mind, of wisdom, the path of the sage or scholar. This path requires development of the intellect through the study of the scriptures and texts of the yogic tradition. The jnana yoga approach is considered the most difficult and at the same time the most direct. It involves serious study and will appeal to those who are more intellectually inclined. Within the context of our Western religious traditions, Kabalistic scholars, Jesuit priests, and Benedictine monks epitomize jnana yogis.

Tantra Yoga

Probably the most misunderstood or misinterpreted of all the yogas, tantra, the sixth branch, is the pathway of ritual, which includes consecrated sexuality. The keyword here is "consecrated," which means to make sacred, to set apart as something holy or hallowed.

In tantric practice we experience the Divine in everything we do. A reverential attitude is therefore cultivated, encouraging a ritualistic approach to life. It is amusing to note that, although tantra has become associated exclusively with sexual ritual, most tantric schools actually recommend a celibate lifestyle.

In essence, tanhtra is the most esoteric of the six major branches. It will appeal to those yogis who enjoy ceremony and relate to the feminine principle of the cosmos, which yogis call shakti. If you see-and are deeply moved by-the significance behind celebration and ritual (holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other rites of passage), tantra yoga may be for you. Many tantric yogis find magic in all types of ceremony, whether it be a Japanese tea ceremony, the consecration of the Eucharist in a Catholic mass, or the consummation of a relationship.

ASHTANGA YOGA

One of the most popular schools of yoga practice today is that of Ashtanga Yoga. Ashtanga literally means "eight limbs". These eight steps (limbs) basically act as guidelines on how to live a meaningful and purposeful life. They serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline; they direct attention toward one's health; and they help us to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our nature.

The first limb, *Yama*, deals with one's ethical standards and sense of integrity, focusing on our behavior and how we conduct ourselves in life. Yamas

are universal practices that relate best to what we know as the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Niyama, the second limb, has to do with self-discipline and spiritual observances. Regularly attending temple or church services, saying grace before meals, developing your own personal meditation practices, or making a habit of taking contemplative walks alone are all examples of niyamas in practice.

Asanas, the postures practiced in yoga, comprise the third limb. In the yogic view, the body is a temple of spirit, the care of which is an important stage of our spiritual growth. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation.

Generally translated as breath control, this fourth stage consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions.

As implied by the literal translation of pranayama, 'life force extension,' yogis believe that it not only rejuvenates the body but actually extends life itself. You can practice pranayama as an isolated technique (i.e., simply sitting and performing a number of breathing exercises), or integrate it into your daily hatha yoga routine.

These first four stages of Patanjali's ashtanga yoga concentrate on refining our personalities, gaining mastery over the body, and developing an energetic awareness of ourselves, all of which prepares us for the second half of this journey, which deals with the senses, the mind, and attaining a higher state of consciousness.

Pratyahara, the fifth limb, means withdrawal or sensory transcendence. It is during this stage that we make the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Keenly aware of, yet cultivating a detachment from, our senses, we direct our attention internally.

The practice of pratyahara provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our cravings: habits that are perhaps detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with our inner growth.

As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for *dharana*, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task!

In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image of a deity, or the silent repetition

of a sound. We, of course, have already begun to develop our powers of concentration in the previous three stages of posture, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses. In asana and pranayama, although we pay attention to our actions, our attention travels. Our focus constantly shifts as we fine-tune the many nuances of any particular posture or breathing technique. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to meditation.

Meditation or contemplation, the seventh stage of ashtanga, is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (dharana) and meditation (*dhyana*) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately a state of being keenly aware without focus.

At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness, it produces few or no thoughts at all. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don't give up. While this may seem a difficult if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the "picture perfect" pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

Patanjali describes this eighth and final stage of ashtanga as a state of ecstasy. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus and transcends the Self altogether. The meditator comes to realize a profound connection to the Divine, interconnectedness with all living things. With this realization comes the "peace that passeth all understanding"; the experience of bliss and being at one with the Universe. On the surface, this may seem to be a rather lofty, "holier than thou" kind of goal.

However, if we pause to examine what we really want to get out of life, would not joy, fulfillment, and freedom somehow find their way onto our list of hopes, wishes, and desires?

What Patanjali has described as the completion of the yogic path is what, deep down, all human beings aspire to: peace. We also might give some thought to the fact that this ultimate stage of yoga-enlightenment-can neither be bought nor possessed. It can only be experienced, the price of which is the continual devotion of the aspirant

OK, now that we've got that out of the way, let's prep the environment and get you ready for your yoga workout!

CHAPTER 4

GETTING READY

Now that you've decided to take up yoga for your health, you must consider the best environment and preparation to do so.

The very best time to practice yoga is first thing in the morning before breakfast. Upon waking, empty the bowels, shower if you wish, then commence the day with your regime of yoga practices. The second most conducive time is early evening, around sunset. It is, of course, far better to do something at a time of the day which suits one, rather than to miss out by being too rigid or idealistic. Always remember integral yoga is a balanced recipe which maintains that to get the best from your yoga practice, you should whenever possible, mix and match the necessary elements of practice which will improve and enhance your spiritual growth and awareness.

Asanas - yoga postures - may be practiced at any time of day except within 2-3 hours of having eaten. You can do postures when the body feels stiff, tense, tired or hyped-up. Be aware not to do too many over-stimulating postures just before bedtime. Asanas are best practiced first in your yoga routine, followed by breathing (Pranayama) and then meditation.

Pranayama may be practiced at any time of day except within 2-3 hours after meals. It may be done when tense or tired or when space does not allow room for postures. Pranayama is best practiced straight after asanas without breaking the flow of awareness. Pranayama is a necessary pre-requisite for successful meditation.

Meditation may be done at any time of day when you feel both awake and relaxed. For best results, you should not do meditation within 2-3 hours of eating, when sleepy, or when mentally "hyped-up".

It is best to have fresh air in a quiet and clean place that suits the concentration and awareness yoga will create. Do not practice yoga in direct sunlight or after sunbathing. Outdoors is OK but you should avoid cold wind and insects. Wear loose comfortable yoga clothing so there is no restriction around the limbs. Exercise on an empty stomach at least three hours after eating.

Do not force your body under any circumstances. Many people don't take heed of this advice. They try to push their bodies into the exercises, whether the

body is ready or not. This is a great mistake which does more harm than you can imagine.

Work slowly with your body. Respect its limits. These limits will gradually extend and you will gain flexibility if you work regularly and sensitively at stretching your limits. The body will get the message and the tension which is preventing you from proceeding will gradually be released. Relax briefly between each practice. Remember the golden rule: "If it's uncomfortable - DON'T"

Do not continue any exercise which causes pain. Pain is a message from the body which must be listened to. In some cases, it may simply be the body's process of changing. In such cases, you simply need to bear with it and continue (without forcing) and it will gradually pass. In other cases, you may be doing harm to some part of your body and may have to stop and do some other preparatory exercises before returning to that one. Check with your doctor or other professional if you have concerns.

Be conscientious and concentrate on what you are doing. Keep your mind on feeling what is happening in the body and concentrate on your breath and position. Do not think about other things or talk to anyone while exercising. If possible, it would be best if you were alone in the room, without distractions such as radio or TV, so that you can concentrate. If this is not possible, just try to concentrate on yourself and ignore what is going on around you.

Give importance to your breathing. Each exercise has a specific way of breathing. This is an extremely important aspect of the exercise. In many cases, it is even more important than the physical movements themselves. Be conscious of your breathing and breathe slowly and deeply, according to the instructions for each exercise. In general (with some exceptions) we inhale when we stretch upward or backward and exhale when we bend downward or forward. Always breathe through the nose both in and out, unless specified otherwise. Remember "Nose for breathing-mouth for eating".

Allow your attention to flow through the body as you become aware of each muscle and the tension and energy stored there and allow that energy to flow and the muscle relax. Complete your exercise series with deep breathing and, if possible, with deep relaxation. There are no age limits either young or old for the practice of yoga. However, the application of the techniques will vary according to the abilities of the practitioner. Those with disabilities, severe, acute or chronic medical conditions should consult both with their medical practitioner and their yoga teacher to assess any dangers or difficulties which may arise.

Avoid exercising at least three months after surgery, unless you have specific permission from your doctor. Some exercises should be resumed only 6 months after surgery, unless you have your doctor's permission to start earlier. Also, avoid all exercises at any time when you suspect internal bleeding or an inflamed appendix.

Never practice any yoga techniques under the influence of alcohol or mind-altering drugs. There are no hard and fast dietary rules necessary to begin the practice of yoga. One does not have to give up smoking, become vegetarian, or be a purist to learn yoga. What you might find, however, is that yoga can help you overcome those bad habits you've been wanting to shed for years and bring you into alignment with your spiritual side which can be key to overcoming vices.

Now let's look at some of the asanas, or positions, that are central to a yoga regime. We'll give you a good basic beginning yoga workout to begin your journey!

CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS TAI CHI

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese martial art form often referred to as the practice of "meditation in motion." The gentle, flowing movements in Tai Chi promote relaxation, stress relief and conscious awareness of the present moment. Tai Chi may help reduce stress, depression and anxiety, improve your balance and coordination, lower your blood pressure and promote better sleep, among many other benefits. Because it is a gentle, low-impact exercise, Tai Chi is generally suitable for people of any level of physical fitness.

Warm Up

Warming up your body is important for facilitating Tai Chi movements. According to Tai Chi instructor Ellae Elinwood in her book, "Stay Young With Tai Chi," Tai Chi warm ups not only help open your body, they also promote a relaxed attitude and encourage a state of well being. One basic Tai Chi warm up is the waist loosening exercise. Stand with your feet parallel and slightly wider than hip-width distance apart. Relax your arms by your sides. Rotate your hips to the right and then the left, allowing your arms to follow the movement of your body. Let your arms hang loosely and flap against your body as you make each rotation. When your body has warmed up, incorporate your neck, shoulders and spine in the rotations, making each movement smooth and fluid.

The windmill exercise is one of the basic Tai Chi movements for promoting flexibility and opening up your spine. Stand with your feet parallel and slightly wider than shoulder-width distance apart. Relax your shoulders and let your arms hang loosely. Bring your hands in front of your body by your pubic bone, with your fingers pointing down toward the floor. Inhale and raise your arms up the center of your body and over your head, fingers pointing up. Stretch toward the ceiling and arch your spine slightly backward. Exhale and slowly bend forward to the floor, moving your hands down the center of your body. Bend forward from your hip joint, allowing your arms to hang loosely in front of you. Inhale and return to your starting posture.

Knee Rolls

Knee rolls encourage mobility in your spine and knees and can help improve your balance. Stand with your feet a few inches apart and your knees slightly bent. Place your hands on your knees with your fingers pointing toward each other. Rotate your knees in a circle, rolling from the left, back, right and front, as though you are tracing a large circle on the floor with your knees. Perform the circular motion in clockwise, then counter-clockwise, directions.

Hand Exercises

The Tai Chi hand exercises help open up your hands and promote flexibility in your shoulders, arms and fingers. Stand with your feet a bit wider than shoulder-width distance apart. Raise your arms straight out in front of you, parallel to the floor at shoulder height. Stretch your hands as wide as you can, then begin rotating your wrists in a clockwise and then counter-clockwise direction.

Closing Posture

The Tai Chi closing posture is performed at the end of a Tai Chi practice to balance your energy and promote feelings of relaxation and stillness. Stand with your feet hip-width distance apart. Relax your shoulders and bring your hands in a cupped-position with your palms facing up, resting in front of your pelvis. Close your eyes. Inhale and imagine that you are pulling your energy upward as you bring your hands up the center of your body to your chest. Exhale and rotate your hands so your palms are facing down. Imagine you are pushing your energy down as you push your hands toward the floor. Perform several repetitions of this exercise.

CHAPTER 6

BEGINNING YOUR WORKOUT

We use the word "workout" loosely here because, as we've pointed out, yoga is less workout and more mind-body exploration. Workout implies sweating as you push your body into exercise mode. That isn't what yoga is about.

So, here's a good way to start your yoga plan. Do these exercises in the order given for a good beginning workout.

Easy Pose

Begin with the easy pose. Easy pose is a comfortable seated position for meditation. This pose opens the hips, lengthens the spine and promotes grounding and inner calm. Basically, you're sitting cross legged like you did in school as a young child. "Criss cross apple sauce", as my teacher used to say!

With the buttocks on the floor, cross your legs and place your feet directly below your knees. Rest your hands on your knees with the palms facing up.

Press your hip bones down into the floor and reach the crown of the head up to lengthen the spine. Drop your shoulders down and back and press your chest towards the front of the room.

Relax your face, jaw, and belly. Let your tongue rest on the roof of your mouth just behind your front teeth. Breathe deeply through the nose down into the belly and hold as long as is comfortable.

Tai Chi Warm Up

Some simple exercises are described here, which can help to deepen your tai chi practice. These include exercises which focus on energy awareness:

Energy ball exercise

Energy Ball Exercise. The practice of holding a ball of energy between one's hands is especially useful in developing an awareness of qi.

A Tai Chi Exercise: Ball of Energy

Even in a time of Gameboys and Wii, most of us can remember the simple childhood fun of playing with a ball.

The exercises here are likewise simple and relaxing. The only difference is that instead of using a tangible ball like a high-bouncer, you'll be creating and using an tai chi ball of energy.

These exercises are useful in developing an awareness of energy and skill in working with energy. This skill is easier to learn in focused exercises such as described here, and then

applied to your tai chi set.

The exercises described here are:

- **Creating an Energy Ball**
- **Rotating an Energy Ball**
- **Shrinking, Growing, and Rotating the Energy Ball**
- **Projecting and Receiving Energy**



Start with the first exercise and get comfortable with that. Then, when you're ready, move on to the other exercises.

Exercise 1: Creating The Tai Chi Ball of Energy.

Rub your hands briskly together. This is the same motion you'd use to warm your hands on a cold day. But this time, add your intention and awareness to the move.

Intention. Hold the intention of bringing and feeling your qi or life force to your hands.

Awareness. Be aware of your hands and feel for this life force energy in each hand. Also feel the connection of energy between your two hands.

Pull your hands gently apart. After your hands feel that they're filled with warmth and qi, and the connection between them is strong, pull them apart gently and slowly.

Keep your hands and fingers soft. Let them flow smoothly through the air. Keep them relaxed and fluid.

Bring your hands closer together. When you feel the connection between your hands weaken, bring them back slowly together.

Don't let your hands touch.

Continue to pull your hands apart and bring them closer together. Repeat this process of slowly moving your hands apart and then back together. Maintain a slow and steady rhythm. Feel the energy in your hands as well as the energy connecting them. See if you notice any changes in these energies as you complete the exercise.

At first, it may be more of a mime routine. Your body may simply go through the motions. With a bit of practice, you're likely to notice a sensation between your palms. Some feel this as heat while others describe it as the force between two repelling magnets.

To end. At the end of this exercise, simply pull your hands slowly apart and let them drop down at your sides. After you've mastered the basic energy ball exercise, here're some variations.

Exercise 2: Rotating the Energy Ball.

- Create and feel the ball of energy between your hands, just as described above.
- Keep your hands a constant distance apart. Slowly move them so one hand is on top and the other is on the bottom. Or, one may move forward while the other moves back toward you, but always maintaining the same distance between the hands. Continue rotating the energy ball.

Those with interests in the martial arts can rotate the ball quickly, but always smoothly.

Exercise 3: Shrinking, Growing, and Rotating the Energy Ball.

Now combine Exercises 1 and 2.

- Create and feel the energy between your hands.
- Keeping the connection between your hands, move them slowly apart and then back toward each other.
- At the same time, rotate your hands. You will be pulling and shrinking the energy ball from different directions.

Exercise 4: Projecting and Receiving Energy.

- Create and feel the energy ball as in the first exercise.
- Now, start to project energy from your right hand. You may have a sense of throwing the energy ball to your left hand. Catch it with your left hand and then project the energy back to the right.
- Enjoy the sensation of throwing and catching the energy ball between your hands—or feel your hands projecting and receiving the energy.

Exercises like this help to develop energy awareness. With this awareness, you'll be able to deepen your tai chi practice by working directly with energy as you execute the movements.

Tai chi is not about visualizing energy, but about working directly with it. The energy ball exercises are a useful step in learning to work with energy smoothly and powerfully in tai chi.

Breathing exercise

Breathing. Due to stress, poor posture, and other factors, many people have developed poor breathing habits. Breathing exercises can help to make your breath longer and smoother.

Mindful breathing is the easiest way for beginners to start a tai chi practice. Like tai chi movements, tai chi breathing should be practiced in a relaxed, continuous way.

Here are some tips to practice tai chi breathing:

Keep your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Say ‘le’ in French. Notice where the tip of your tongue naturally goes. This is where you’ll want to place the tongue tip when practicing tai chi.

Inhale and exhale through your nose. Use mouth breathing only if you’re suffering from allergies, colds, or other types of nasal congestion.

Aim for a long, continuous breath without a pause between the inhale and exhale. The breath, like a circle, shouldn’t stop.

Breath to and from the belly. As the belly moves in and out with each breath, your organs receive an internal massage.

Relax. Relax your eyes, your chest, your jaws. Relax everywhere else you may be holding tension.

And breathe...

Over time, you should find your breath being longer and deeper, with a greater sense of relaxation.

Breathe During Your Tai Chi Workout. Remember to breathe during your tai chi workout. Breathe continuously. Try not to hold your breath at any point.

As a beginner, don’t spend a lot of time and effort worrying about coordinating breath and movements. Trying to synchronize these too soon can be counterproductive and lead to a lot of stress and tension. Instead, relax and breath naturally.

Many Opportunities to Practice. Doctors report that 90% of Americans don’t fully engage their diaphragms when breathing. Although the average adult breaths $\sim 18,000\text{-}30,000$ x per day, most people breath shallowly and hold their breath when tense, angry, or fearful. Attention to breathing can break these patterns, letting people inhale more fresh air, smoothly and calmly.

Don’t limit this type of relaxed, smooth breathing only tai chi workouts. It’s also great during normal activities throughout the day as well.

Each breath is a new opportunity to practice.

- Standing in a neutral position

Standing in a Neutral Position. Standing in a neutral position, with the hands at the sides is a common exercise to do before executing a tai chi set. This standing exercise is useful for identifying areas of tension within the body, even before the more difficult positions in a tai chi form.

Just stand. Tai chi standing may not sound very difficult or useful. But paradoxically and perhaps oddly enough --at least from a Western perspective--one of the most essential warm-ups for a tai chi workout is to simply stand.

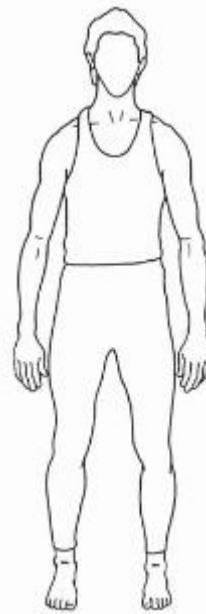


The process of standing is a way to develop proper body alignments—for tai chi but also for walking, talking, and all other moments in life.

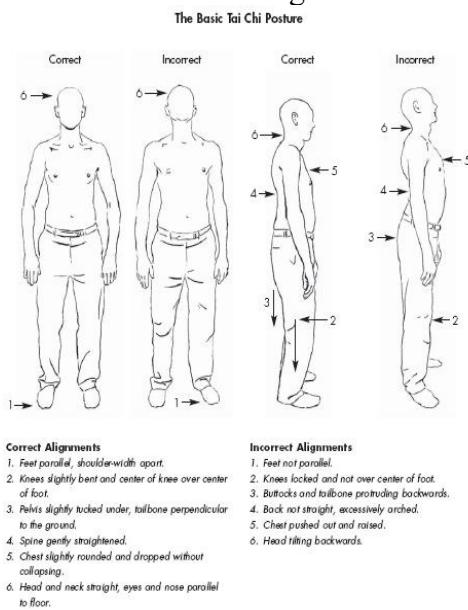
Tai chi standing is also a way to develop a better awareness of one's body, and to know when it is better or less aligned. Standing teaches you how to be comfortable in your body. Tension that has built up in muscles or other body parts contributes to poor posture and discomfort.

When standing, one becomes aware—sometimes painfully aware—of where tension is held in the body. Habits such as clenching one's teeth or hunching in front of the computer—will lock tension into the head and shoulders—two very common tension spots.

When standing, you can put attention to these tense areas to dissolve the tension and to relax.



How to Stand. The tai chi standing practice isn't quite as simple as just getting up from a chair. There's a physical process and quick checklist of standing alignments. There are a number of different standing positions, but the neutral standing position is the most suitable for beginners.



The Neutral Standing Position. Here're some pointers for your standing practice:

- **Begin by relaxing your mind and body.**
- **Your feet should be parallel and pointing directly ahead.**
- **The feet should be hip- or shoulder-width apart.** Pick a distance that's comfortable. Your weight should drop down evenly to both feet.

- **Bend your knees slightly.** But, don't bend too far forward. Look down to make sure you can still see your toes. If not, adjust your stance until you can.
- **Gently stretch your spine so your tailbone points to the ground.** This reduces the normal S-curve of the spine. Let the spine relax into this position, without force or tension.
- **Keep your neck and head straight.** A head normally weighs about 8-12 pounds, which can create a lot of pressure on the spine. To avoid this, the head should feel slightly lifted above the vertebrae. Pull the chin back slightly and downwards.
- **Tongue tip is at the roof of the mouth.** This is the same position it would be in, when singing "la la la".
- **Relax your chest , keeping your spine straight.** Avoid the normal military pose.
- **Rest your hands lightly on the sides of your thighs.** The arms are relaxed and the palms face backward at thigh level.
- **Breath softly through your belly.** Keep the breath soft and circular, without pausing between the inhale and exhale. Read here for more tips on When standing, try to stand for a minimum of 5 minutes. This is the time needed for noticeable results. But, if your body or mind is especially stressed, more time will be needed to obtain the benefits of standing.

Be gentle and build your tai chi standing practice slowly, gradually increasing the length of our practice in 2 or 3 minute increments.

The practice of tai chi standing isn't as easy as it may sounds. Some would even say the practice of standing isn't easy at all. It may immediately bring thoughts and sensations of aches or itches to the forefront, along with a list of other things one might be doing.

The Chinese have a term for this, and speak of the taming the 'Monkey Mind'.

Standing: An Important Exercise for Tai Chi. Taming the Monkey Mind isn't easy and you may want to ease into a regular standing practice.

But, holding a standing position can yield incredible benefits in terms of body and energy awareness as well as better body alignments. It is also a way to develop strong roots and a sense of groundedness.

Sooner or later, serious practitioners will find that tai chi standing is essential to developing a strong tai chi practice.

Circling hands exercise

Circling Hands. A simple exercise, the circling hands exercise, is a good way to develop this practice of unified body motion. In this exercise, all parts of the body open and expand smoothly, and then—equally smoothly—close and shrink in clear circular patterns.

Tai chi is all about cycles and circles. It embodies the philosophy of cycles. What expands now, will soon shrink back in, and what retreats will later surge outward.

In the tai chi form, the body bends inward then stretches outward. There is a calming rhythm of growing and shrinking, opening and closing throughout a tai chi practice.

In tai chi, all movements are circular. Expansion outward, including strikes and blows, is circular. Yielding, or retreating, also has a circular nature, and is not linear.

The circling hands exercise is a simple way to practice the physical circles and energy cycles of tai chi.

It's a good and simple warm-up before doing your tai chi form. By isolating and repeating a simple circular movement, you'll be better able to feel the energy cycles in your tai chi form. And, your movements will be smoother, fuller, and rounder.

Here's how the Circling Hands Exercise is Done.

- **Start As If You're About To Give Someone a Standing Applause**—as if you've just witnessed a breath-taking tai chi performance or a moving piano concerto.

From this standing position--using the basics discussed in --your palms are facing each other. Hands are in front of your chest, fingers outward. Both hands are the same distance from your centerline.

- **Pick A Distance For The Space Between Your Hands.** This is the distance you'll be using for the exercise. Feel the energy connection between your hands. Don't let your hands come in closer or spread further apart when making circles.

- **Start Making Circles With Your Hands.** Just start making slow, vertical circles. The hands move up and out away from the body, maintaining the same distance apart. Then, bring your hands back down and inward.

Someone watching from the side should see your hands tracing a circle in the air. You can ask a friend or check in a mirror to see if you're really tracing circles. If your movement looks more angular than circular, work on smoothing the motion out to a true circle.

Keep the same steady rate of movement throughout.

The hands maintain the same distance from your body's centerline.





- **As your hands move outward, expand them.** Feel your hands and wrists growing as your hands move away from your body. Expand the spaces between all of the bones in your hand and wrists. There are 27 bones in the hand and 8 more in the wrist—so there are many places to expand. This expansion brings more blood and energy out to the hands and fingertips.
- **As Your Hands Move Inward, Contract Them.** Close the joints and spaces back down again as your hands come closer to your body. This will help to return the blood and energy back to the body.
- **Get Your Entire Body Involved.** After you've gotten a sense of the hands and wrists growing and shrinking as they move out and then back in, do the same for the other parts of your body. Feel this growing and shrinking throughout your entire body, from your feet, through the ankles, knees, and upward.

When doing this exercise—as well as during your tai chi form—feel the movement in your entire body. As stated in the “One part moves, all parts move; one part stops, all parts stop.” This is one of the core principles of tai chi.

- **Keep Circling.** Continue making the circles, growing and shrinking with the circles. Remember that the size and position of the circle stay the same.
- **Change Circle Direction.** Then, keeping the same circle in space, simply change the direction of the circle. Someone from the side might have seen a counter-clockwise circle, and now they would see the same circle traced in a clockwise direction.

Try to do the same number of circles in both directions.

When you've done that, you're ready to start a new set of circling hands--or ready to move onto another tai chi warm-up or to begin your tai chi set.

Other Variations of Circling Hands. The basic exercise is simple, but there are a number of ways the circling hands exercise can be done.

- Experiment with different sized circles—very large, airy circles or compressed smaller ones.
- Vary the space between your hands.
- Change the height of the circles, from higher, up to eye level, or lower circles done in front of your belly.

For all variations, it's best to complete the same number of circles in both directions.

Have Fun Circling. Sometimes groups of tai chi practitioners have entire conversations while circling their hands. This isn't too unusual in China. It's a useful and relaxing exercise.

Have fun with the smoothness and simplicity of the Circling Hands warm up.

- Weight shifting exercise

Some exercises explore the applications of tai chi. These include:

Push Hands Partner Exercise

Push Hands Partner Exercise. Partner exercises such as push hands are a way to test how effectively you're able to work with the energies of tai chi.

With the external force from a partner, it's clear when you're able to effectively work with the tai chi principles or not. You receive immediate feedback on your body alignments and ability to receive and to project energy.

Tai Chi Push Hands: An Exercise for All Practitioners

In solo forms, tai chi is a way to understand one's self. It's a way to feel the internal flow of energy, as well as any internal tension. There is no opponent except whatever negative thoughts, heavy emotions, or internal demons arise.

Tai Chi Push Hands: External Forces. With push hands, one must deal with external forces in addition to whatever internal stress one carries. Rather than feeling simply the air, one has a direct experience of the force and energy from one's practice partner.



A Training for Martial Arts. Push hands is a non-violent version of sparring in tai chi. It is the bridge to move from a fluid solo form to tai chi for martial arts. Two persons maintain arm contact while trying to unbalance and to push each other.

But, push hands is not a sumo match and it's not about sheer mass or muscle power. There's typically no hitting, kicking, or wrestling, although there're some push hands styles where throws and joint-locks are all part of the game.



Push Hands for All Practitioners. It's also possible to practice push hands in a non-threatening and cooperative way. This form of push hands is useful for all tai chi students, even those without an interest in the martial aspects of tai chi.

Push Hands for Relaxation. The key is to use relaxation, intent, awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge of the internal energies to push and to

uproot your partner. It tests your ability to root and to remain relaxed and balanced, despite whatever forces are coming in from the external environment.

When confronted with an opponent or even a practice partner, it's easy for emotions such as fear or anger to arise. Pushing to win can also take you away from a relaxed state. Focus to maintain a steady breath and a relaxed stance with good alignments.

When you're tense or not well aligned, it will be easy for your partner to take your balance. This forces you to quickly recognize and to relax areas of tension—or you will find yourself easily off-balanced by your partner.

Circles in Push Hands. Like all of tai chi, push hands involves circles. Here, the hands circle back and forth between the two practitioners. One half of the circle defends, and the second half attacks.



Yield and Defend. For defending, the emphasis is on rooting or grounding, and deflecting or yielding to an attack. There is no attempt to directly oppose the force from your partner.

Attack. Immediately after yielding, counter and attack by using your partner's force against him or her. If your partner has overextended and is tilting forward, you'll find that only an ounce of force will be needed to send them off-balance.

Basic Yoga Moves

Sun Salutation

On days when you think you have no time for yoga, try and do at least one or two rounds of the Sun Salutation. You'll feel the difference.



After downward-facing dog, move into 3 rounds of sun salutations. Stand facing the direction of the sun with both feet touching. Bring the hands together, palm-to-palm, at the heart. Inhale and raise the arms upward. Slowly bend backward, stretching arms above the head. Exhale slowly bending forward, touching the earth with respect until the hands are in line with the feet, head touching knees.

Inhale and move the right leg back away from the body in a wide backward step. Keep the hands and feet firmly on the ground, with the left foot between the hands. Raise the head. While exhaling, bring the left foot together with the right.

Keep arms straight, raise the hips and align the head with the arms, forming an upward arch. Exhale and lower the body to the floor until the feet, knees, hands, chest, and forehead are touching the ground. Inhale and slowly raise the head and bend backward as much as possible, bending the spine to the maximum

While exhaling, bring the left foot together with the right. Keep arms straight, raise the hips and align the head with the arms, forming an upward arch. Inhale and move the right leg back away from the body in a wide backward step.

Keep the hands and feet firmly on the ground, with the left foot between the hands. Raise the head. Exhale slowly bending forward, touching the earth with respect until the hands are in line with the feet, head touching knees.

Inhale and raise the arms upward. Slowly bend backward, stretching arms above the head. Stand facing the direction of the sun with both feet touching. Bring the hands together, palm-to-palm, at the heart.

Strength

This section is used to develop strength and stamina.

The movements include: Down Dog, Forward Fold, Flat Back Extend, Intense Pose, Lung, Warrior 1, Warrior 2, Sun Warrior, and Extended Sun Warrior,

Down Dog



Downward-Facing Dog: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Come onto the floor on your hands and knees. Set your knees directly below your hips and your hands slightly forward of your shoulders. Spread your palms, index fingers parallel or slightly turned out, and turn your toes under.

Step 2

Exhale and lift your knees away from the floor. At first keep the knees slightly bent and the heels lifted away from the floor. Lengthen your tailbone away from the back of your pelvis and press it lightly toward the pubis. Against this resistance, lift the sitting bones toward the ceiling, and from your inner ankles draw the inner legs up into the groins.

Step 3

Then with an exhalation, push your top thighs back and stretch your heels onto or down toward the floor. Straighten your knees but be sure not to lock them. Firm the outer thighs and roll the upper thighs inward slightly. Narrow the front of the pelvis.

Step 4

Firm the outer arms and press the bases of the index fingers actively into the floor. From these two points lift along your inner arms from the wrists to the tops of the shoulders. Firm your shoulder blades against your back, then widen them and draw them toward the tailbone. Keep the head between the upper arms; don't let it hang.

Step 5

Adho Mukha Svanasana is one of the poses in the traditional Sun Salutation sequence. It's also an excellent yoga asana all on its own. Stay in this pose anywhere from 1 to 3 minutes.

Forward Fold



RICK CUMMINGS

Standing Forward Bend: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in Tadasana, hands on hips. Exhale and bend forward from the hip joints, not from the waist. As you descend draw the front torso out of the groins and open the space between the pubis and top sternum. As in all the forward bends, the emphasis is on lengthening the front torso as you move more fully into the position.

Step 2

If possible, with your knees straight, bring your palms or finger tips to the floor slightly in front of or beside your feet, or bring your palms to the backs of your ankles. If this isn't possible, cross your forearms and hold your elbows. Press the heels firmly into the floor and lift the sitting bones toward the ceiling. Turn the top thighs slightly inward.

Step 3

With each inhalation in the pose, lift and lengthen the front torso just slightly; with each exhalation release a little more fully into the forward bend. In this way the torso oscillates almost imperceptibly with the breath. Let your head hang from the root of the neck, which is deep in the upper back, between the shoulder blades.

Step 4

Uttanasana can be used as a resting position between the standing poses. Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute. It can also be practiced as a pose in itself.

Step 5

Don't roll the spine to come up. Instead bring your hands back onto your hips and reaffirm the length of the front torso. Then press your tailbone down and into the pelvis and come up on an inhalation with a long front torso.

Flat Back Extend



Standing Half Forward Bend: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

From [Uttanasana](#) (Standing Forward Bend), press your palms or fingertips into the floor (or blocks on the floor) beside your feet. With an inhale, straighten your elbows and arch your torso away from your thighs, finding as much length between your pubic bone and navel as possible.

Step 2

With your palms (or fingertips) push down and back against the floor, and lift the top of your sternum up (away from the floor) and forward. You might bend your knees slightly to help get this movement, which will arch the back.

Step 3

Look forward, but be careful not to compress the back of your neck. Hold the arched-back position for a few breaths. Then, with an exhale, release your torso into full Uttanasana.

Intense Pose



Intense Side Stretch Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). With an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 feet apart. Rest your hands on your hips. Turn your left foot in 45 to 60 degrees to the right and your right foot out to the right 90 degrees. Align the right heel with the left heel. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the right knee cap is in line with the center of the right ankle.

Step 2

Exhale and rotate your torso to the right, squaring the front of your pelvis as much as possible with the front edge of your mat. As the left hip point turns forward, press the head of the left femur back to ground the back heel. Press your outer thighs inward, as if squeezing a block between your thighs. Firm your scapulas against your back torso, lengthen your coccyx toward the floor, and arch your upper torso back slightly.

Step 3

With another exhalation, lean the torso forward from the groins over the right leg. Stop when the torso is parallel to the floor. Press your fingertips to the floor on either side of the right foot. If it isn't possible for you to touch the floor, support your hands on a pair of blocks or the seat of a folding chair. Press the thighs back and lengthen the torso forward, lifting through the top of the sternum.

Step 4

In this pose the front-leg hip tends to lift up toward the shoulder and swing out to the side, which shortens the front-leg side. Be sure to soften the front-leg hip toward the earth and away from the same-side shoulder while you continue squeezing the outer thighs. Press the base of the big toe and the inner heel of the front foot firmly into the floor, then lift the inner groin of the front leg deep into the pelvis.

Step 5

Hold your torso and head parallel to the floor for a few breaths. Then, if you have the flexibility, bring the front torso closer to the top of the thigh, but don't round forward from the waist to do this. Eventually the long front torso will rest down on the thigh. Hold your maximum position for 15 to 30 seconds, then come up with an inhalation by pressing actively through the back heel and dragging the coccyx first down and then into the pelvis. Then go to the left side.

Lung



RICHARD CUMMINGS

High Lunge: Step-by-Step Instruction

Step 1

From [Uttanasana](#) (Standing Forward Bend), bend your knees and, with an inhale, step your left foot back toward the back edge of your mat, with the ball of the foot on the floor. Step back far enough so that your right knee can form a right angle.

Step 2

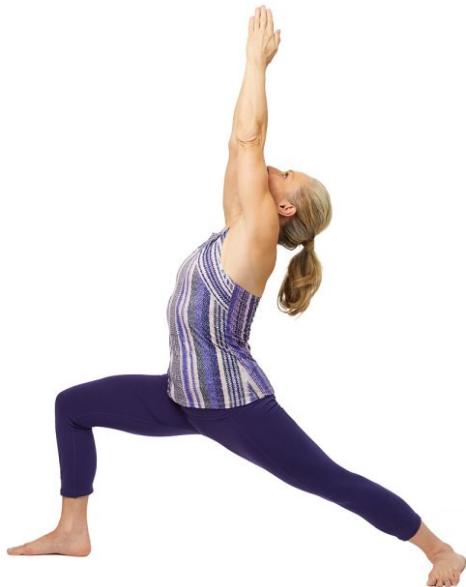
Lay your torso on your front thigh and lengthen it forward. To soften your right groin, imagine that the thigh is sinking toward the floor under your torso's weight. Look forward. Simultaneously, firm the left thigh and push it up toward the ceiling, holding the left knee straight. Stretch your left heel toward the floor.

Step 3

Exhale and step your right foot back beside the left. Repeat the above instructions, but reverse left and right. Or come into [Adho Mukha Svanasana](#) (Downward-Facing Dog),

inhale, and step the right foot forward between your hands.

Warrior I Pose



Warrior I Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#) (Mountain Pose). With an exhale, step or lightly jump your feet 3 1/2 to 4 feet apart. Raise your arms perpendicular to the floor (and parallel to each other), and reach actively through the little-finger sides of the hands toward the ceiling. Firm your scapulas against your back and draw them down toward the coccyx.

Step 2

Turn your left foot in 45 to 60 degrees to the right and your right foot out 90 degrees to the right. Align the right heel with the left heel. Exhale and rotate your torso to the right, squaring the front of your pelvis as much as possible with the front edge of your mat. As the left hip point turns forward, press the head of the left femur back to ground the heel. Lengthen your coccyx toward the floor, and arch your upper torso back slightly.

Step 3

With your left heel firmly anchored to the floor, exhale and bend your right knee over the right ankle so the shin is perpendicular to the floor. More flexible students should align their right thigh parallel to the floor.

Step 4

Reach strongly through your arms, lifting the ribcage away from the pelvis. As you ground

down through the back foot, feel a lift that runs up the back leg, across the belly and chest, and up into the arms. If possible, bring the palms together. Spread the palms against each other and reach a little higher through the pinky-sides of the hands.

Keep your head in a neutral position, gazing forward, or tilt it back and look up at your thumbs.

Step 5

Stay for 30 seconds to a minute. To come up, inhale, press the back heel firmly into the floor and reach up through the arms, straightening the right knee. Turn the feet forward and release the arms with an exhalation, or keep them extended upward for more challenge. Take a few breaths, then turn the feet to the left and repeat for the same length. When you're finished return to Tadasana.

Warrior II



Warrior II Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#) (Mountain Pose). With an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet 3 1/2 to 4 feet apart. Raise your arms parallel to the floor and reach them actively out to the sides, shoulder blades wide, palms down.

Step 2

Turn your right foot slightly to the right and your left foot out to the left 90 degrees. Align the left heel with the right heel. Firm your thighs and turn your left thigh outward so that the center of the left knee cap is in line with the center of the left ankle.

Step 3

Exhale and bend your left knee over the left ankle, so that the shin is perpendicular to the

floor. If possible, bring the left thigh parallel to the floor. Anchor this movement of the left knee by strengthening the right leg and pressing the outer right heel firmly to the floor.

Step 4

Stretch the arms away from the space between the shoulder blades, parallel to the floor. Don't lean the torso over the left thigh: Keep the sides of the torso equally long and the shoulders directly over the pelvis. Press the tailbone slightly toward the pubis. Turn the head to the left and look out over the fingers.

Step 5

Stay for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Inhale to come up. Reverse the feet and repeat for the same length of time to the left.

Sun Warrior/Extended Sun Warrior



Warrior III Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#) (Mountain Pose), exhale and fold forward to [Uttanasana](#). From Uttanasana, exhale and step your left foot back into a high lunge position. Your right knee should be more or less at a right angle. Lay the midline of your torso (from the pubis to the sternum) down on the midline of the right thigh (from the knee to the hip crease) and bring your hands to your right knee, right hand to the outer knee, left hand to the inner. Squeeze the knee with your hands, lift your torso slightly, and with an exhalation, turn it slightly to the right.

Step 2

Now from the lunge position, stretch your arms forward, parallel to the floor and parallel to each other, palms facing each other. Exhale and press the head of the right thighbone back and press the heel actively into the floor. Synchronize the straightening of the front leg and the lifting of the back leg. As you lift the back leg, resist by pressing the tailbone into the pelvis.

Step 3

Normally students come up into Virabhadrasana III by lunging the torso forward. This tends to shift the body weight onto the ball of the front foot and unbalance the position. Don't allow the torso to swing forward as you move into position; instead, as you straighten the front knee, think of pressing the head of the thighbone back. This centers the femur in the hip joint, grounds the heel into the floor, and stabilizes the position.

Step 4

The arms, torso, and raised leg should be positioned relatively parallel to the floor. For many students the pelvis tends to tilt. Release the hip [of the raised leg] toward the floor until the two hip points are even and parallel to the floor. Energize the back leg and extend it strongly toward the wall behind you; reach just as actively in the opposite direction with the arms. Bring the head up slightly and look forward, but be sure not to compress the back of your neck.

Step 5

Stay in this position for 30 seconds to a minute. Release back to the lunge on an exhalation. Bring your hands to the floor on either side of the right foot, and on an exhalation, step your left foot forward to meet your right. Stay in this forward bend for a few breaths, then repeat for the same length of time on the other side.

Balance

Bird Pose



Crane (Crow Pose): Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Squat down from [Tadasana](#) with your inner feet a few inches apart. If it isn't possible to keep your heels on the floor, support them on a thickly folded blanket. Separate your knees wider than your hips and lean the torso forward, between the inner thighs. Stretch your arms forward, then bend your elbows, place your hands on the floor and the backs of the upper arms against the shins.

Step 2

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. 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. In Bakasana you consciously attempt to contract your front torso and round your back completely. To help yourself do this, keep your tailbone as close to your heels as possible.

Step 3

With an exhalation, 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. As a beginner at this pose, you might want to stop here, perched securely on the bent arms.

Step 4

But if you are ready to go further, squeeze the legs against the arms, press the inner hands firmly to the floor and (with an inhalation) straighten the elbows. Seen from the side the arms are angled slightly forward relative to the floor. The inner knees should be glued to the outer arms, high up near the armpits. Keep the head in a neutral position with your eyes looking at the floor, or lift the head slightly, without compressing the back of the neck, and look forward.

Step 5

Stay in the pose anywhere from 20 seconds to 1 minute. To release, exhale and slowly lower your feet to the floor, back into a squat.

Pose Level

Contraindications and Cautions

Carpal tunnel syndrome

Pregnancy

Modifications and Props

Some students have a difficult time lifting into Bakasana from the floor. It's often helpful to prepare for this pose squatting on a block or other height, so that your feet are a few inches off the floor.

Deepen the Pose

The full pose sometimes causes varying degrees of pain in the wrists. Instead of spreading the fingers on the floor, curl them slightly. This should take some of the pressure off the wrists.

Beginner's Tip

Beginners tend to move into this pose by lifting their buttocks high away from their heels. In Bakasana try to keep yourself tucked tight, with the heels and buttocks close together. When you are ready to take the feet off the floor, push the upper arms against the shins and draw your inner groins deep into the pelvis to help you with the lift.

Eagle Pose



Eagle Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). Bend your knees slightly, lift your left foot up and, balancing on your right foot, cross your left thigh over the right. Point your left toes toward the floor, press the foot back, and then hook the top of the foot behind the lower right calf. Balance on the right foot.

Step 2

Stretch your arms straight forward, parallel to the floor, and spread your scapulas wide across the back of your torso. Cross the arms in front of your torso so that the right arm is above the left, then bend your elbows. Snug the right elbow into the crook of the left, and raise the forearms perpendicular to the floor. The backs of your hands should be facing each other.

Step 3

Press the right hand to the right and the left hand to the left, so that the palms are now facing each other. The thumb of the right hand should pass in front of the little finger of the left. Now press the palms together (as much as is possible for you), lift your elbows up, and stretch the fingers toward the ceiling.

Step 4

Stay for 15 to 30 seconds, then unwind the legs and arms and stand in Tadasana again.

Repeat for the same length of time with the arms and legs reversed

Floating Half Moon Pose

Single Leg Squat



Single Leg Squat Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

From Table position, tuck the toes under and walk the hands in towards the feet, keeping the knees bent and bringing the hips pressed down towards the heels in a squatting position.

Step 2

Walk the feet a little further apart until the torso is not resting against the thighs and the feet are flat on the floor.

Step 3

Keep your hands on the floor in front of you as you slowly extend and straighten the right leg, pressing out through the heel. Let the hips

Step 4

Breathe and hold for 1-3 breaths.

Step 5

To release: slowly slide the extended leg back into a squatting position.

Step 6

Repeat on other side.

Aeroplane Pose



Aeroplane Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

From Table position, tuck the toes under and walk the hands in towards the feet, keeping the knees bent and bringing the hips pressed down towards the heels in a squatting position.

Step 2

Walk the feet a little further apart until the torso is not resting against the thighs and the feet are flat on the floor.

Step 3

Keep your hands on the floor in front of you as you slowly extend and straighten the right leg, pressing out through the heel. Let the hips

Step 4

Breathe and hold for 1-3 breaths.

Step 5

To release: slowly slide the extended leg back into a squatting position.

Step 6

Repeat on other side.

Tree Pose



Tree Pose Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). Shift your weight slightly onto the left foot, keeping the inner foot firm to the floor, and bend your right knee. Reach down with your right hand and clasp your right ankle.

Step 2

Draw your right foot up and place the sole against the inner left thigh; if possible, press the right heel into the inner left groin, toes pointing toward the floor. The center of your pelvis should be directly over the left foot.

Step 3

Rest your hands on the top rim of your pelvis. Make sure the pelvis is in a neutral position, with the top rim parallel to the floor.

Step 4

Lengthen your tailbone toward the floor. Firmly press the right foot sole against the inner thigh and resist with the outer left leg. Press your hands together in [Anjali Mudra](#). Gaze softly at a fixed point in front of you on the floor about 4 or 5 feet away.

Step 5

Stay for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Step back to Tadasana with an exhalation and repeat for the same length of time with the legs reversed.

Hip Openers/Chest and Arms

Standing Star Pose



Standing Star Pose Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

From Mountain pose, step the feet wide apart, with the arms out to the side. The feet should be under the wrists, facing forward and parallel.

Step 2

Press your weight into the feet, pull up the knee caps and squeeze the thighs, tuck the tailbone, and feel the legs strong and solid, rooted into the floor.

Step 3

Reach out through the fingertips, trying to touch the side walls. Relax the shoulders down and back, gently opening the chest towards the front of the room.

Step 4

Inhale and press the crown of the head up towards the ceiling. Look straight ahead with the chin parallel to the floor.

Step 5

Inhale deeply into the belly and chest, exhale press into the feet, fingers and crown, feeling your body expanding out in 5 directions.

Step 6

Keep breathing and hold for 4-8 breaths.

Step 7

To release, bend one knee and step back into Mountain pose.

Half Lotus



Half Lotus Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

Come into easy pose with the legs crossed Indian style. With both hands, carefully lift one foot up and place it on your left thigh, close to your hip.

Step 2

Press the hip bones down into the floor and reach the crown of the head up to lengthen the spine. Drop the shoulders down and back, and press the chest towards the front of the room.

Step 3

Relax the face, jaw, and belly. Let the tongue rest on the roof of the mouth, just behind the front teeth.

Step 4

Breathe deeply through the nose down into the belly. Hold as long as comfortable, then switch legs.

Swan Pose



Swan Pose Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

Before positioning yourself in swan pose, make sure that your hips and ankles are properly warmed up. It can be advisable to practice several hip opening yoga asanas to open and warm up the hips first.

Step 2

Start on all fours. Bring your right knee forward between your hands with the heel of your right foot close to the left hip crease. Slide your left knee back, lengthening the left leg and squaring your hips to the mat.

Step 3

Place your hands underneath your shoulders and feel the weight evenly distributed across your palms.

Feel the pelvic floor lift up into Mulabandha.

Step 4

Use these Bandhas to protect your lower back as you press your left thigh into the earth.

Inhale and reach your torso up into Swan lift, your heart lifting to the sky.

Feel your hips release, and feel energy floating down toward your knees.

Step 5

Hinge forward from the hips and exhale into swan dive. Keep the spine long and feel a deeper stretch in the gluteal muscles on the right side of the body. Fold your hands on top of each other and rest your forehead on the backs of your hands.

Feel the stretch all along your left thigh and deep in the psoas muscle.

Feel the release of tension in your forehead and facial muscles as your head rests on the backs of your arms.

Step 6

Press your hands under your shoulders. Lift knees off the mat. Draw your right knee back under your hip and come onto all fours

Plank



Plank Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

Start in [Adho Mukha Svanasana](#). Then inhale and draw your torso forward until the arms are perpendicular to the floor and the shoulders directly over the wrists, torso parallel to the floor.

Step 2

Press your outer arms inward and firm the bases of your index fingers into the floor. Firm your shoulder blades against your back, then spread them away from the spine. Also spread your collarbones away from the sternum.

Step 3

Press your front thighs up toward the ceiling, but resist your tailbone toward the floor as you lengthen it toward the heels. Lift the base of the skull away from the back of the neck and look straight down at the floor, keeping the throat and eyes soft.

Step 4

Plank Pose is one of the positions in the traditional Sun Salutation sequence. You can also perform this pose by itself and stay anywhere from 30 seconds to 1 minute.

Modified Prone Lift



Modified Prone Lift Pose Step by Step Instructions

Step 1

Start in [Dolphin Pose](#), knees bent. Then walk your feet back until your shoulders are directly over the elbows and your torso is parallel to the floor.

Step 2

Press your inner forearms and elbows firmly against the floor. Firm your shoulder blades against your back and spread them away from the spine. Similarly spread your collarbones away from the sternum.

Step 3

Press your front thighs toward the ceiling, but resist your tailbone toward the floor as you lengthen it toward the heels. Lift the base of your skull away from the back of the neck and look straight down at the floor, keeping the throat and eyes soft.

Bridge Pose



Bridge Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Lie supine on the floor, and if necessary, place a thickly folded blanket under your shoulders to protect your neck. Bend your knees and set your feet on the floor, heels as close to the sitting bones as possible.

Step 2

Exhale and, pressing your inner feet and arms actively into the floor, push your tailbone upward toward the pubis, firming (but not hardening) the buttocks, and lift the buttocks off the floor. Keep your thighs and inner feet parallel. Clasp the hands below your pelvis and extend through the arms to help you stay on the tops of your shoulders.

Step 3

Lift your buttocks until the thighs are about parallel to the floor. Keep your knees directly over the heels, but push them forward, away from the hips, and lengthen the tailbone toward the backs of the knees. Lift the pubis toward the navel.

Step 4

Lift your chin slightly away from the sternum and, firming the shoulder blades against your back, press the top of the sternum toward the chin. Firm the outer arms, broaden the shoulder blades, and try to lift the space between them at the base of the neck (where it's resting on the blanket) up into the torso.

Step 5

Stay in the pose anywhere from 30 seconds to 1 minute. Release with an exhalation, rolling the spine slowly down onto the floor.

Boat Pose



Step by Step

Step 1

Sit on the floor with your legs straight in front of you. Press your hands on the floor a little behind your hips, fingers pointing toward the feet, and strengthen the arms. Lift through the top of the sternum and lean back slightly. As you do this make sure your back doesn't round; continue to lengthen the front of your torso between the pubis and top sternum. Sit on the "tripod" of your two sitting bones and tailbone.

Step 2

Exhale and bend your knees, then lift your feet off the floor, so that the thighs are angled about 45-50 degrees relative to the floor. Lengthen your tailbone into the floor and lift your pubis toward your navel. If possible, slowly straighten your knees, raising the tips of your toes slightly above the level of your eyes. If this isn't possible remain with your knees bent, perhaps lifting the shins parallel to the floor.

Step 3

Stretch your arms alongside the legs, parallel to each other and the floor. Spread the shoulder blades across your back and reach strongly out through the fingers. If this isn't possible, keep the hands on the floor beside your hips or hold on to the backs of your thighs.

Step 4

While the lower belly should be firm, it shouldn't get hard and thick. Try to keep the lower belly relatively flat. Press the heads of the thigh bones toward the floor to help anchor the pose and lift the top sternum. Breathe easily. Tip the chin slightly toward the sternum so the base of the skull lifts lightly away from the back of the neck.

Step 5

At first stay in the pose for 10-20 seconds. Gradually increase the time of your stay to 1 minute. Release the legs with an exhalation and sit upright on an inhalation.

Happy Baby Pose



Happy Baby Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Lie on your back. With an exhale, bend your knees into your belly.

Step 2

Inhale, grip the outsides of your feet with your hands (if you have difficulty holding the feet directly with your hands, hold onto a belt looped over each sole.) Open your knees slightly wider than your torso, then bring them up toward your armpits.

Step 3

Position each ankle directly over the knee, so your shins are perpendicular to the floor. Flex through the heels. Gently push your feet up into your hands (or the belts) as you pull your hands down to create a resistance.

Twisting

Half Lord of the Fishes Pose



Half Lord of the Fishes Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Sit on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you, buttocks supported on a folded blanket. Bend your knees, put your feet on the floor, then slide your left foot under your right leg to the outside of your right hip. Lay the outside of the left leg on the floor. Step the right foot over the left leg and stand it on the floor outside your left hip. The right knee will point directly up at the ceiling.

Step 2

Exhale and twist toward the inside of the right thigh. Press the right hand against the floor just behind your right buttock, and set your left upper arm on the outside of your right thigh near the knee. Pull your front torso and inner right thigh snugly together.

Step 3

Press the inner right foot very actively into the floor, release the right groin, and lengthen the front torso. Lean the upper torso back slightly, against the shoulder blades, and continue to lengthen the tailbone into the floor.

Step 4

You can turn your head in one of two directions: Continue the twist of the torso by turning it to the right; or counter the twist of the torso by turning it left and looking over the left shoulder at the right foot.

Step 5

With every inhalation lift a little more through the sternum, pushing the fingers against the floor to help. Twist a little more with every exhalation. Be sure to distribute the twist evenly throughout the entire length of the spine; don't concentrate it in the lower back. Stay for 30 seconds to 1 minute, then release with an exhalation, return to the starting position, and repeat to the left for the same length of time. Watch a video demonstration of this pose

Marichi Pose



Marichi's Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Sit in Dandanasa ([Staff Pose](#)), then bend your right knee and put the foot on the floor, with

the heel as close to the right sitting bone as possible. Keep the left leg strong and rotated slightly inward; ground the head of the thigh bone into the floor. Press the back of the left heel and the base of the big toe away from the pelvis. Also press the inner right foot actively into the floor, but soften the inner right groin to receive the pubis as you twist. Grounding the straight-leg thigh and bent-knee foot will help you lengthen your spine, which is always the first prerequisite of a successful twist.

Step 2

With an exhalation, rotate your torso to the right and wrap your left arm around the right thigh. Hold the outer thigh with your left hand, then pull the thigh up as you release the right hip toward the floor. Press your right fingertips onto the floor just behind your pelvis to lift the torso slightly up and forward.

Step 3

Remember to keep your straight leg and bent-knee foot grounded. Sink the inner right groin deeper into the pelvis, then lengthen your front belly up out of the groin along the inner right thigh. Continue lengthening the spine with each inhalation, and twist a little more with each exhalation. Hug the thigh to your belly, then lean back against your shoulder blades into an upper-back backbend. Gently turn your head to the right to complete the twist in your cervical spine.

Step 4

Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Then release with an exhalation, reverse the legs and twist to the left for an equal length of time.

Head to Knee Forward Bend



Head-to-Knee Forward Bend: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Sit on the floor with your legs straight in front of you. Use a blanket under your buttocks if necessary. Inhale, bend your right knee, and draw the heel back toward your perineum.

Rest your right foot sole lightly against your inner left thigh, and lay the outer right leg on the floor, with the shin at a right angle to the left leg (if your right knee doesn't rest comfortably on the floor, support it with a folded blanket).

Step 2

Press your right hand against the inner right groin, where the thigh joins the pelvis, and your left hand on the floor beside the hip. Exhale and turn the torso slightly to the left, lifting the torso as you push down on and ground the inner right thigh. Line up your navel with the middle of the left thigh. You can just stay here, using a strap to help you lengthen the spine evenly, grounding through the sitting bones.

Step 3

Or, when you are ready, you can drop the strap and reach out with your right hand to take the inner left foot, thumb on the sole. Inhale and lift the front torso, pressing the top of the left thigh into the floor and extending actively through the left heel. Use the pressure of the left hand on the floor to increase the twist to the left. Then reach your left hand to the outside of the foot. With the arms fully extended, lengthen the front torso from the pubis to the top of the sternum.

Step 4

Exhale and extend forward from the groins, not the hips. Be sure not to pull yourself forcefully into the forward bend, hunching the back and shortening the front torso. As you descend, bend your elbows out to the sides and lift them away from the floor.

Step 5

Lengthen forward into a comfortable stretch. The lower belly should touch the thighs first, the head last. Stay in the pose anywhere from 1 to 3 minutes. Come up with an inhalation and repeat the instructions with the legs reversed for the same

Revolved Side Angle Pose



Revolved Side Angle Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). With an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 feet apart. Rest your hands on your hips. Turn your right foot out to the right 90 degrees and turn your left foot *in* slightly to the right. Align the right heel with the left heel. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the kneecap is in line with the center of the right ankle.

Step 2

Exhale and turn your torso to the right until you're facing directly out over the right leg; as you do this, lift your left heel off the floor and spin on the ball of the foot until the inner left foot is parallel to the inner right foot. Then exhale again and bend your right knee. If possible, bring the right thigh parallel to the floor. Keep your left leg active by pressing the thigh up toward the ceiling and extending strongly through the left heel. At the same time, resist the lift of the left thigh by pressing the tailbone toward the pubis.

Step 3

With another exhale turn further to the right and lean the torso down, placing the left hand on the floor inside the right foot. Dig your right thumb into the right hip crease and push the thighbone down toward the floor. Firm the shoulder blades into the back ribs and lean the torso back slightly, away from the inner thigh. Stay in this position for a few breaths.

Step 4

If this position seems challenging enough, stay for the recommended time. If you want to go further, bend your left elbow and bring it to the outside of the right knee. Resist the knee and elbow against each other. If possible, straighten your left elbow and reach the hand toward the floor (if you can't reach the floor, support your hand on a block). You can keep your right hand on your hip, or stretch it over the back of the right ear with the palm facing down. Then turn your head to look at the right arm. As in all twists lengthen and soften the belly, extend the spine with each inhalation, and increase the twist as you exhale.

Step 5

Stay for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Inhale to come up, exhale to release the twist. Reverse the feet and repeat for the same length of time to the left. Then return to Tadasana.

Revolved Triangle Pose



Revolved Triangle Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). With an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 feet apart. Raise your arms parallel to the floor and reach them actively out to the sides, shoulder blades wide, palms down. Turn your left foot in 45 to 60 degrees to the right and your right foot out to the right 90 degrees. Align the right heel with the left heel. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the right kneecap is in line with the center of the right ankle.

Step 2

With an exhalation, turn your torso to the right, and square your hip points as much as

possible with the front edge of your sticky mat. As you bring the left hip around to the right, resist the head of the left thigh bone back and firmly ground the left heel.

Step 3

With another exhalation, turn your torso further to the right and lean forward over the front leg. Reach your left hand down, either to the floor (inside or outside the foot) or, if the floor is too far away, onto a block positioned against your inner right foot. Allow the left hip to drop slightly toward the floor. You may feel the right hip slip out to the side and lift up toward the shoulder, and the torso hunch over the front leg. To counteract this, press the outer right thigh actively to the left and release the right hip away from the right shoulder. Use your right hand, if necessary, to create these two movements, hooking the thumb into the right hip crease.

Step 4

Beginning students should keep their head in a neutral position, looking straight forward, or turn it to look at the floor. More experienced students can turn the head and gaze up at the top thumb. From the center of the back, between the shoulder blades, press the arms away from the torso. Bring most of your weight to bear on the back heel and the front hand.

Step 5

Stay in this pose anywhere from 30 seconds to one minute. Exhale, release the twist, and bring your torso back to upright with an inhalation. Repeat for the same length of time with the legs reversed, twisting to the left.

Bending

Hindi Squat



Step 1

Squat with your feet as close together as possible. (Keep your heels on the floor if you can; otherwise, support them on a folded mat.)

Step 2

Separate your thighs slightly wider than your torso. Exhaling, lean your torso forward and fit it snugly between your thighs.

Step 3

Press your elbows against your inner knees, bringing your palms together in Anjali Mudra (Salutation Seal), and resist the knees into the elbows. This will help lengthen your front torso.

Step 4

To go further, press your inner thighs against the sides of your torso. Reach your arms forward, then swing them out to the sides and notch your shins into your armpits. Press your finger tips to the floor, or reach around the outside of your ankles and clasp your back heels.

Step 5

Hold the position for 30 seconds to 1 minute, then inhale, straighten the knees, and stand into Uttanasana.

Forward Fold



Standing Forward Bend: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in Tadasana, hands on hips. Exhale and bend forward from the hip joints, not from the waist. As you descend draw the front torso out of the groins and open the space between the pubis and top sternum. As in all the forward bends, the emphasis is on lengthening the front torso as you move more fully into the position.

Step 2

If possible, with your knees straight, bring your palms or finger tips to the floor slightly in front of or beside your feet, or bring your palms to the backs of your ankles. If this isn't possible, cross your forearms and hold your elbows. Press the heels firmly into the floor and lift the sitting bones toward the ceiling. Turn the top thighs slightly inward.

Step 3

With each inhalation in the pose, lift and lengthen the front torso just slightly; with each exhalation release a little more fully into the forward bend. In this way the torso oscillates almost imperceptibly with the breath. Let your head hang from the root of the neck, which is deep in the upper back, between the shoulder blades.

Step 4

Uttanasana can be used as a resting position between the standing poses. Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute. It can also be practiced as a pose in itself.

Step 5

Don't roll the spine to come up. Instead bring your hands back onto your hips and reaffirm the length of the front torso. Then press your tailbone down and into the pelvis and come up on an inhalation with a long front torso.

Flat Back Extend



Standing Half Forward Bend: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

From [Uttanasana](#) (Standing Forward Bend), press your palms or fingertips into the floor (or blocks on the floor) beside your feet. With an inhale, straighten your elbows and arch your torso away from your thighs, finding as much length between your pubic bone and navel as possible.

Step 2

With your palms (or fingertips) push down and back against the floor, and lift the top of your sternum up (away from the floor) and forward. You might bend your knees slightly to help get this movement, which will arch the back.

Step 3

Look forward, but be careful not to compress the back of your neck. Hold the arched-back position for a few breaths. Then, with an exhale, release your torso into full Uttanasana.

Intense Pose



Intense Side Stretch Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in [Tadasana](#). With an exhalation, step or lightly jump your feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 feet apart. Rest your hands on your hips. Turn your left foot in 45 to 60 degrees to the right and your right foot out to the right 90 degrees. Align the right heel with the left heel. Firm your thighs and turn your right thigh outward, so that the center of the right knee cap is in line with the center of the right ankle.

Step 2

Exhale and rotate your torso to the right, squaring the front of your pelvis as much as possible with the front edge of your mat. As the left hip point turns forward, press the head of the left femur back to ground the back heel. Press your outer thighs inward, as if squeezing a block between your thighs. Firm your scapulas against your back torso, lengthen your coccyx toward the floor, and arch your upper torso back slightly.

Step 3

With another exhalation, lean the torso forward from the groins over the right leg. Stop when the torso is parallel to the floor. Press your fingertips to the floor on either side of the right foot. If it isn't possible for you to touch the floor, support your hands on a pair of blocks or the seat of a folding chair. Press the thighs back and lengthen the torso forward, lifting through the top of the sternum.

Step 4

In this pose the front-leg hip tends to lift up toward the shoulder and swing out to the side, which shortens the front-leg side. Be sure to soften the front-leg hip toward the earth and away from the same-side shoulder while you continue squeezing the outer thighs. Press the base of the big toe and the inner heel of the front foot firmly into the floor, then lift the inner groin of the front leg deep into the pelvis.

Step 5

Hold your torso and head parallel to the floor for a few breaths. Then, if you have the flexibility, bring the front torso closer to the top of the thigh, but don't round forward from the waist to do this. Eventually the long front torso will rest down on the thigh. Hold your maximum position for 15 to 30 seconds, then come up with an inhalation by pressing actively through the back heel and dragging the coccyx first down and then into the pelvis. Then go to the left side.

Cross Leg Forward Fold



Standing Forward Bend with Crossed Legs: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Stand in Tadasana, hands on hips. Exhale and bend forward from the hip joints, not from the waist. As you descend draw the front torso out of the groins and open the space

between the pubis and top sternum. As in all the forward bends, the emphasis is on lengthening the front torso as you move more fully into the position.

Step 2

If possible, with your knees straight, bring your palms or finger tips to the floor slightly in front of or beside your feet, or bring your palms to the backs of your ankles. If this isn't possible, cross your forearms and hold your elbows. Press the heels firmly into the floor and lift the sitting bones toward the ceiling. Turn the top thighs slightly inward.

Step 3

With each inhalation in the pose, lift and lengthen the front torso just slightly; with each exhalation release a little more fully into the forward bend. In this way the torso oscillates almost imperceptibly with the breath. Let your head hang from the root of the neck, which is deep in the upper back, between the shoulder blades.

Step 4

Uttanasana can be used as a resting position between the standing poses. Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute. It can also be practiced as a pose in itself.

Step 5

Don't roll the spine to come up. Instead bring your hands back onto your hips and reaffirm the length of the front torso. Then press your tailbone down and into the pelvis and come up on an inhalation with a long front torso.

Bound Angle Pose



Bound Angle Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1

Sit with your legs straight out in front of you, raising your pelvis on a blanket if your hips

or groins are tight. Exhale, bend your knees, pull your heels toward your pelvis, then drop your knees out to the sides and press the soles of your feet together.

Step 2

Bring your heels as close to your pelvis as you comfortably can. With the first and second finger and thumb, grasp the big toe of each foot. Always keep the outer edges of the feet firmly on the floor. If it isn't possible to hold the toes, clasp each hand around the same-side ankle or shin.

Step 3

Sit so that the pubis in front and the tailbone in back are equidistant from the floor. The perineum then will be approximately parallel to the floor and the pelvis in a neutral position. Firm the sacrum and shoulder blades against the back and lengthen the front torso through the top of the sternum.

See also [More Forward Bend Poses](#)

Step 4

Never force your knees down. Instead release the heads of the thigh bones toward the floor. When this action leads, the knees follow.

Step 5

Stay in this pose anywhere from 1 to 5 minutes. Then inhale, lift your knees away from the floor, and extend the legs back to their original position.

Corpse Pose – Savasana



Savasana is a pose of total relaxation- making it one of the most challenging asanas.

Benefits include:

- Calms the brain and helps relieve stress and mild depression
- Relaxes the body
- Reduces headache, fatigue, and insomnia
- Helps to lower blood pressure

In Savasana it's essential that the body be placed in a neutral position. Sit on the floor with your knees bent, feet on the floor, and lean back onto your forearms. Lift your pelvis slightly off the floor and, with your hands, push the back off the pelvis toward the tailbone, then return the pelvis to the floor.

Inhale and slowly extend the right leg, then the left, pushing through the heels. Release both legs, softening the groins, and see that the legs are angled evenly relative to the mid-line of the torso, and that the feet turn out equally. You should narrow the front pelvis and soften (but don't flatten) the lower back.

With your hands lift the base of the skull away from the back of the neck and release the back of the neck down toward the tailbone. If you have any difficulty doing this, support the back of the head and neck on a folded blanket. Broaden the base of the skull too, and lift the crease of the neck diagonally into the center of the head. Make sure your ears are equidistant from your shoulders.

Reach your arms toward the ceiling, perpendicular to the floor. Rock slightly from side to side and broaden the back ribs and the shoulder blades away from the spine. Then release the arms to the floor, angled evenly relative to the mid-line of torso.

Turn the arms outward and stretch them away from the space between the shoulder blades. Rest the backs of the hands on the floor as close as you comfortably can to the index finger knuckles. Make sure the shoulder blades are resting evenly on the floor. Imagine the lower tips of the shoulder blades are lifting diagonally into your back toward the top of the sternum. From here, spread the collarbones.

In addition to quieting the physical body in Savasana, it's also necessary to pacify the sense organs. Soften the root of the tongue, the wings of the nose, the channels of the inner ears, and the skin of the forehead, especially around the bridge of the nose between the eyebrows. Let the eyes sink to the back of the head, then turn them downward to gaze at the heart. Release your brain to the back of the head.

Stay in this pose for 5 minutes for every 30 minutes of practice. To exit, first roll gently with an exhalation onto one side, preferably the right. Take 2 or 3 breaths. With another exhalation press your hands against the floor and lift your torso, dragging your head slowly after. The head should always come up last.

After completing these exercises, take a few moments to practice some deep meditation which is covered in the next section.

CHAPTER 7

MEDITATION

RELAXATION MEDITATION

This remarkably easy and relaxing meditation makes use of a little-known secret about the eyes. Allowing the eyes to rest in a soft downward gaze has an instant, automatic relaxing effect. Relaxation meditation provides a great deal of stress reduction and can be used as a quick 2 minute relax and refresh break almost anywhere. You will also realize a heightened sense of alertness.

Sit comfortably with your spine reasonably straight.

Allow your eyes to rest comfortably downward, gazing softly, but not focused on anything.

Without closing your eyes completely, let your eyelids drop to a level that feels most comfortable.

Continue gazing downward... the act of gazing is your primary focus (rather than the area at which you are gazing). You may notice your breathing becoming more rhythmic.

It's ok to let your attention drift a bit. If your eyes become very heavy, it's ok to let them close. If you notice you've come out of your relaxed space, simply bring your attention back to your relaxed downward gaze.

ENERGY HEALING MEDITATION

In this simple healing meditation, you send the powerful healing Life Force directly to the area in need of help. This Life Force is the energy behind all healing. Wherever this energy is flowing and in balance, there is health and well being. Wherever this energy is blocked or out of balance, illness manifests.

Many people believe in visualization as a key healing tool. Energy healing meditation helps you to concentrate your positive energy on an afflicted area and alleviate any adverse symptoms and feelings that are being manifested through the physical pain.

Sit reasonably straight and close your eyes.

Breathe slowly, as silently as possible. (Holding your breath after inhaling or exhaling is not recommended.)

As you inhale, feel yourself breathing the healing Life Force in through your solar plexus. Picture this Life Force as a very refined, light energy.

As you exhale, gently direct this light energy to the afflicted area. If there is not a specific ailing area, disperse this light energy throughout your body as you exhale. Continue until you feel the area has received enough Life Force.

CHAPTER 8

DESKTOP YOGA

Whether you're a high-powered executive or an administrative assistant with your boss's problems becoming your own, many people in the business world experience an inordinate amount of stress at the office. It would be nice to have a quiet place to practice conventional yoga techniques, but that isn't always possible.

Yoga experts have devised a way for you to do a short yoga program right at your desk. Try these exercises to de-stress at the office.

Sit up tall in your chair, or if possible stand up. Stretch your arms overhead and interlock your fingers, turn the palms to the ceiling. Take a deep breathe in and on the exhale extend your side torso and take the tips of the shoulder blades into the body. Take another deep breath and on the exhale, stretch to the right, inhale come up and exhale stretch to the left.

On an inhale, lift your shoulders up to your ears and then exhale and let them drop. Repeat 3 times. Contract the shoulder musclefully when you lift your shoulders up and then on the drop it will release more completely.

Stand (or sit at your desk) with your feet planted firmly in the ground. Inhale and raise the arms out to the side, palms down. Exhale and rotate the palms up, rolling the shoulders back. Take an inhale and on the exhale, bend the elbows in toward the waist. Inhale and on the exhale, bring the palms to the belly. This exercise helps to open the chest and extend the upper back.

Take your bands behind your back and interlock the fingers, stretching the shoulders back, opening the chest. Take several breaths. Make sure that your head stays in the mid-line and that your eye gaze is on the horizon.

Stand by the wall, extend your right arm and place the palm on the wall with the fingers up. On an exhale, turn your chest away, taking the shoulder blade into the torso. Stand by your desk and place your palms on the desk top with the fingers pointing toward your body. Gently stretch the lower arm and wrist.

Wrap the right arm around the torso and place your right hand on the left shoulder with the elbow at chest height and facing forward. Put your left hand on the right elbow and on an exhale, stretch it toward the left, opening between the shoulder blades. Hold for several breaths and then release. Repeat on the other side

Reach the right arm into the air and on an exhale, bend the elbow and reach your fingers down the back, between the shoulder blades. Place the left hand on the elbow and on an exhale gently pull the elbow to the left. Relax the ribs and hold for several breaths. Release and repeat on the other side

Hug your arms around your chest and then put one elbow underneath the other, the hand facing toward each other and fingers to the ceiling. Exhale and slowly raise the arms so that the elbows come up to the height of the shoulder, keep the shoulders down. Repeat on the other side.

Sit on your chair and pull back away from the desk, resting your palms on the desk top and extend your side torso. Lift the ribs up, let the shoulder blades slide towards the desk, and make sure the head is extended from the spine with the chin towards the chest.

Sit on your chair, feet planted firmly in the floor, sitting bones pressing into the chair. Extend the side torso, and twist to the right (on an exhale), one hand on back to chair, one hand on the side of the chair. Hold for a few breaths and then repeat the other side.

Sit forward on your chair and open the legs a little wider than the hips. Lean forward from the hips and drop your torso down. Let the head and arms hang down toward the floor.

Sit upright in your chair with your feet planted firmly on the ground. Press your sitting bones down into the chair and extend the side torso. Relax your shoulders. Place your palms on your knees and spread the fingers wide. Take a deep breath in and on the exhale, extend your tongue to your chin; focus your eyes to your nose. Inhale and bring the tongue back into the mouth. Exhale and stick the tongue out again and this time focus the eyes up to your forehead. Repeat 3 times.

Sit upright on chair, relax your shoulders and extend the side torso up. Relax your facial muscles, the jaw and tongue. Circle the eyes clockwise 8 times and counter-clockwise 8 times. Close your eyes and breathe deeply for a few slow breaths. You may want to try a quick relaxation meditation to wrap up this session just to refresh and regroup.

Yoga can be used for more than simple de-stressing. It can also be used to alleviate the symptoms of everyday ailments without the use of medication.

CHAPTER 9

YOGA FOR HEADACHES

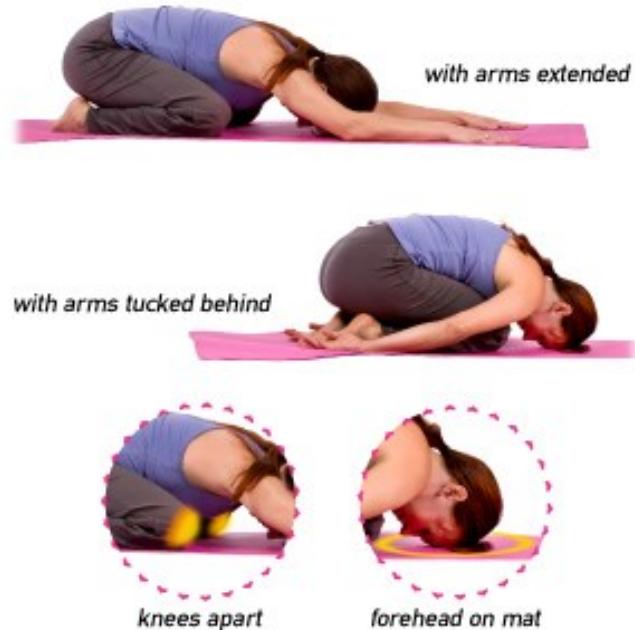
There are many different kinds of headaches. Some (like tension headaches and migraines) are fairly common; others (like sinus headaches or headaches caused by brain tumors) are relatively rare. Various treatments are recommended for dealing with headaches. Yoga asanas and breathing can help too, though mostly with tension-type headaches.

Everyone gets a tension headache now and again, but if you suffer from this type of headache habitually, it's important to consult a doctor or other health practitioner to treat the pain and work to resolve the ultimate source of the tension.

When treating a tension headache with asanas and breathing, it's important to start practicing as soon as possible after you start to feel the pain. Once the headache is established it will be very difficult to alleviate.

Here are the yoga positions that can be used to alleviate a headache: [Child's Pose \(Balasana\)](#).

Child's Pose
Balasana



Kneel on the floor. Touch your big toes together and sit on your heels, then separate your knees about as wide as your hips.

Exhale and lay your torso down between your thighs. Broaden your sacrum across the back of your pelvis and narrow your hip points toward the navel, so that they nestle down onto the inner thighs. Lengthen your tailbone away from the back of the pelvis while you lift the base of your skull away from the back of your neck.

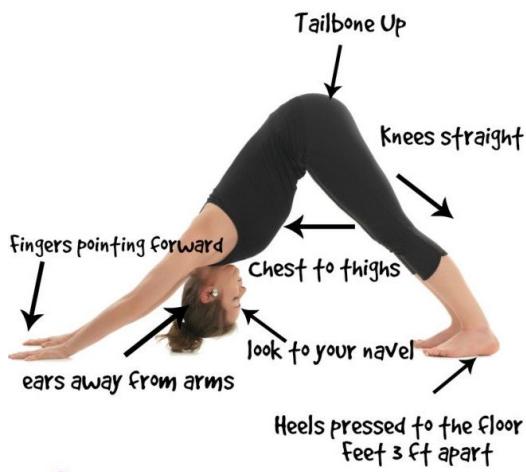
Lay your hands on the floor alongside your torso, palms up, and release the fronts of your shoulders toward the floor. Feel how the weight of the front shoulders pulls the shoulder blades wide across your back.

Balasana is a resting pose. Stay anywhere from 30 seconds to a few minutes. Beginners can also use Balasana to get a taste of a deep forward bend, where the torso rests on the thighs. Stay in the pose from 1 to 3 minutes. To come up, first lengthen the front torso, and then with an inhalation lift from the tailbone as it presses down and into the pelvis.

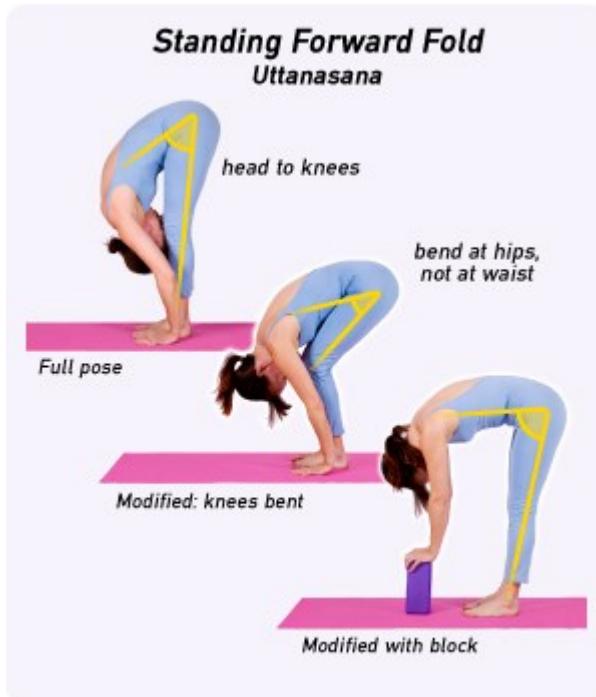
Note: you can do the child's pose when you get tired, out of breath, or need to rest. Simply pick up with your exercises again when refreshed. Child's pose is also a great way to quickly alleviate stress at any time.

Downward Facing Dog.

HOW TO DO THE DOWNWARD DOG



Standing Forward Bend



Stand in relaxed position with your hands on your hips. Exhale and bend forward from the hip joints, not from the waist. As you descend draw the front torso out of the groins and open the space between the pubis and top sternum. As in all the forward bends, the emphasis is on lengthening the front torso as you move more fully into the position.

If possible, with your knees straight, bring your palms or finger tips to the floor slightly in front of or beside your feet, or bring your palms to the backs of your ankles. If this isn't possible, cross your forearms and hold your elbows. Press the heels firmly into the floor and lift the sitting bones toward the ceiling. Turn the top thighs slightly inward.

With each inhalation in the pose, lift and lengthen the front torso just slightly; with each exhalation release a little more fully into the forward bend. In this way, the torso oscillates almost imperceptibly with the breath. Let your head hang from the root of the neck, which is deep in the upper back, between the shoulder blades.

This pose can be used as a resting position between the standing poses. Stay in the pose for 30 seconds to 1 minute. It can also be practiced as a pose in itself. Don't roll the spine to come up. Instead bring your hands back onto your hips and reaffirm the length of the front torso. Then press your tailbone down and into the

pelvis and come up on an inhalation with a long front torso.

YOGA FOR MENSTRUAL CRAMPS

Menstrual cramps can be very debilitating for those who suffer from severe cramps early in their cycle. While your first inclination might be to lay on your couch in the fetus position moaning in pain, try yoga to relieve the pain.

Exercise during menstruation is generally highly recommended. It's believed that exercise can ease the discomfort of your period; quell mood swings, anxiety, and depression; and reduce bloating.

Most contemporary yoga teachers advise a fairly conservative approach toward asana practice during menstruation. This makes perfect sense for women who feel sluggish during their cycle.

However, many other women don't feel the need to change anything about their practice during menstruation, except maybe to limit strenuous inverted poses. Each student should decide for herself what kind of asana sequence is most appropriate for her body during menstruation.

Reclining Bound Angle



Sit with the soles of your feet touching each other. Exhale and lower your back torso toward the floor, first leaning on your hands.

Once you are leaning back on your forearms, use your hands to spread the back of your

pelvis and release your lower back and upper buttocks through your tailbone. Bring your torso all the way to the floor, supporting your head and neck on a blanket roll or bolster if needed.

With your hands grip your topmost thighs and rotate your inner thighs externally, pressing your outer thighs away from the sides of your torso. Next slide your hands along your outer thighs from the hips toward the knees and widen your outer knees away from your hips.

Then slide your hands down along your inner thighs, from the knees to the groins. Imagine that your inner groins are sinking into your pelvis. Push your hip points together, so that while the back pelvis widens, the front pelvis narrows. Lay your arms on the floor, angled at about 45 degrees from the sides of your torso, palms up. The natural tendency in this pose is to push the knees toward the floor in the belief that this will increase the stretch of the inner thighs and groins. But especially if your groins are tight, pushing the knees down will have just the opposite of the intended effect: The groins will harden, as will your belly and lower back. Instead, imagine that your knees are floating up toward the ceiling and continue settling your groins deep into your pelvis. As your groins drop toward the floor, so will your knees.

To start, stay in this pose for one minute. Gradually extend your stay anywhere from five to 10 minutes. To come out, use your hands to press your thighs together, then roll over onto one side and push yourself away from the floor, head trailing the torso. Move back into sitting position with the soles of your feet touching.

Seated Twist

Still sitting twist to the right with an exhalation, hold for 30 seconds, then twist to the left for 30 seconds. Repeat three times to each side, each time holding for 30 seconds.



CHAPTER 10

YOGA FOR DEPRESSION

The word "depression" covers a wide range of conditions, from long- standing and severe clinical or major depression to shorter-term and episodic mild depression, to situational depression brought on by a major life change, such as the death of a spouse, job loss, divorce.

Many different therapies are available for depression, including anti- depressants and psychotherapy. Studies indicate that regular exercise too, including yoga asanas and breathing, can help some people ease the symptoms of mild to moderate forms of depression.

Of course, one major hurdle in using exercise to alleviate depression is motivation, or lack of it. Most depressed people don't really feel much like getting out of bed in the morning, much less exercising.

Then too, failure to see the exercise program through can make a depressed person feel even worse. So start off slowly, and be sure to choose an exercise that you really enjoy; if possible, exercise with a supportive partner or group. Try to exercise at least three times a week.

- **Reclining Bound Angle**
- **Downward Facing Dog**
- **Standing Forward Bend**

Headstand

Use a folded blanket or sticky mat to pad your head and forearms. Kneel on the floor. Lace your fingers together and set the forearms on the floor, elbows at shoulder width. Roll the upper arms slightly outward, but press the inner wrists firmly into the floor. Set the crown of your head on the floor.

If you are just beginning to practice this pose, press the bases of your palms together and snuggle the back of your head against the clasped hands. More experienced students can open their hands and place the back of the head into the open palms.

Inhale and lift your knees off the floor. Carefully walk your feet closer to your elbows, heels elevated. Actively lift through the top thighs, forming an inverted "V."

Firm the shoulder blades against your back and lift them toward the tailbone so the front torso stays as long as possible. This should help prevent the weight of the shoulders collapsing onto your neck and head.

Exhale and lift your feet away from the floor. Take both feet up at the same time, even if it means bending your knees and hopping lightly off the floor. As the legs (or thighs, if your knees are bent) rise to perpendicular to the floor, firm the tailbone against the back of the

pelvis.

Turn the upper thighs in slightly, and actively press the heels toward the ceiling (straightening the knees if you bent them to come up). The center of the arches should align over the center of the pelvis, which in turn should align over the crown of the head.

Firm the outer arms inward, and soften the fingers. Continue to press the shoulder blades against the back, widen them, and draw them toward the tailbone. Keep the weight evenly balanced on the two forearms.

It's also essential that your tailbone continues to lift upward toward the heels. Once the backs of the legs are fully lengthened through the heels, maintain that length and press up through the balls of the big toes so the inner legs are slightly longer than the outer.

As a beginner, stay in this position for 10 seconds. Gradually add 5 to 10 seconds onto your stay every day or so until you can comfortably hold the pose for 3 minutes. Then continue for 3 minutes each day for a week or two, until you feel relatively comfortable in the pose.

HOW TO DO THE SUPPORTED HEADSTAND



Again gradually add 5 to 10 seconds onto your stay every day or so until you can comfortably hold the pose for 5 minutes. Come down with an exhalation, without losing the lift of the shoulder blades, with both feet touching the floor at the same time.

- **Upward Bow**
- **Seated Twist Bridge**
- **Head to Knee Forward Bend**

Benefits Include:

- Calms the brain and helps relieve mild depression
- Stretches the spine, shoulders, hamstrings, and groins
- Stimulates the liver and kidneys
- Improves digestion
- Helps relieve the symptoms of menopause
- Relieves anxiety, fatigue, headache, menstrual discomfort
- Therapeutic for high blood pressure, insomnia, and sinusitis
- Strengthens the back muscles during pregnancy (up to second trimester), done without coming forward, keeping your back spine concave and front torso long.
- Use caution with this pose if you have a knee injury.

Sit on the floor with your buttocks lifted on a folded blanket and your legs straight in front of you. Inhale, bend your right knee, and draw the heel back toward your perineum. Rest your right foot sole lightly against your inner left thigh, and lay the outer right leg on the floor, with the shin at a right angle to the left leg (if your right knee doesn't rest comfortably on the floor, support it with a folded blanket).

Press your right hand against the inner right groin, where the thigh joins the pelvis, and your left hand on the floor beside the hip. Exhale and turn the torso slightly to the left, lifting the torso as you push down on and ground the inner right thigh. Line up your navel with the middle of the left thigh. You can just stay here, using a strap to help you lengthen the spine evenly, grounding through the sitting bones.

Or, when you are ready, you can drop the strap and reach out with your right hand to take the inner left foot, thumb on the sole. Inhale and lift the front torso, pressing the top of the left thigh into the floor and extending actively through the left heel. Use the pressure of the left hand on the floor to increase the twist to the left. Then reach your left hand to the outside of the foot. With the arms fully extended, lengthen the front torso from the pubis to the top of the sternum.

Exhale and extend forward from the groins, not the hips. Be sure not to pull yourself forcefully into the forward bend, hunching the back and shortening the front torso. *As you descend, bend your elbows out to the sides and lift them away from the floor.*

5. Lengthen forward into a comfortable stretch. The lower belly should touch the thighs first, the head last. Stay in the pose anywhere from 1 to 3 minutes. Come up with an inhalation and repeat the instructions with the legs reversed for the same length of time.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

The popularity of yoga is, without a doubt, increasing as people are constantly trying to balance the stresses of everyday life with their own spiritual well-being.

It is important for you, the reader, to realize that we are not medical professionals and have simply tried to provide you with an introduction to yoga and meditation. This book is a way for you to get started on your own yoga program.

If you have special health considerations, you should be sure and consult with your doctor before embarking on a yoga program, or any other exercise program for that matter. We cannot be held responsible in any way for any problems that may arise from your yoga journey. This is meant simply as an informational tool to help you start down that path.

But you will find that once you start initiating yoga into your daily exercise routine, you will most likely notice a heightened state of well-being and a more spiritual connection to both your inner self as well as any higher power you choose to acknowledge.

Remember to concentrate on your breathing when performing the poses, and don't force your body into positions it isn't comfortable doing. When meditating, focus on the inner calm you are trying to achieve.

Perform these exercises when you get the chance. You don't have to do a full cycle to feel better. Even practicing one exercise when you have the time can have huge therapeutic benefits to mind, body, and soul!

Yoga can better your life in so many ways. It can help you become a better spouse, parent, worker, and person. You can help others by spreading your experiences with yoga and meditation. Imagine the thanks you'll receive as you tell others how this ancient art has enhanced your life!

