

# Yoga Insight to *Empower* Your Journey

**Y**oga has the power to transform your life by helping you understand and process difficult emotions through an intentional mind, body, and breath connection. Deepen your understanding of yoga's fundamentals and discover how yoga can help you heal with these popular articles from *Spirituality & Health* magazine.



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# The Secret Sacredness of *the Yoga Body*

WHAT REALLY MATTERS ON THE MAT

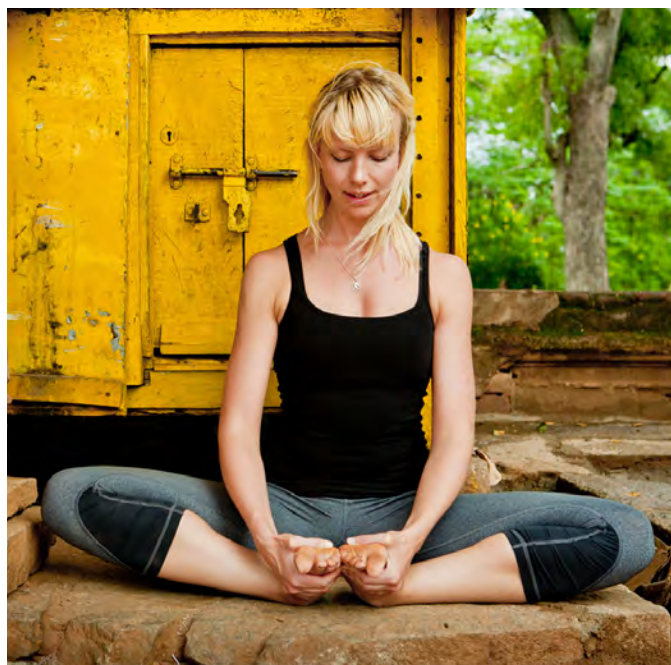
**MANY YOGA PRACTITIONERS GET CURIOUS** about the deeper practices behind what we are doing on our yoga mats. What exactly are the philosophies we are following here? What's the meaning behind all this Ujjayi breathing and Downward Facing Dog?

Well, it really depends on who you ask. There is a lot of confusing (and sometimes conflicting) information out there. When I first started practicing yoga, I thought Crow Pose was five thousand years old. I thought there was something ancient and grave about postures poetically named after Eagles and Dragons in a language so old no one actually speaks it anymore.

I didn't have the whole story. The idea of yoga may be five thousand years old, but it was never intended for me: for a long time, yoga was only for upper caste Brahmin men in Indian society. Women were not supposed to practice it, and it was at its heart a religious expression of Hinduism, not something a white North American girl like me could just drop into. Plus, the physical postures that make up the kind of yoga I practice here in the West are relatively modern, coming into fashion (and probably existence) as recently as the early 20th century.

There was some mention of about 15 yoga postures in the 15th century text *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. B.K.S Iyengar came out with 200 postures in his 1966 book *Light on Yoga*. Where did all those extra poses come from? As it turns out, Indian teachers in the early 20th century were mixing the spirituality and meditation of ancient traditions with a physical practice that included elements of Swedish gymnastics and English military routines and calling the whole thing "yoga."

Teacher Mark Singleton, in an article exploring the history of yoga, writes that this was happening in the context of a push towards Indian independence from English



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**Crow pose may not have the deep and ancient sacredness of a five thousand year old practice, but this story of independence through physical strength is powerful in its own right.**

colonization: "Building better bodies, people reasoned, would make for a better nation and improve the chances of success in the event of a violent struggle against the colonizers. [...] Some teachers, such as Tiruka [...] traveled the country disguised as yoga gurus, teaching strengthening and combat techniques to potential revolutionaries. Tiruka's aim was to prepare the people for an uprising against the British, and, by disguising himself as a religious ascetic, he avoided the watchful eye of the authorities."

Crow pose may not have the deep and ancient sacredness of a five thousand year old practice, but this story of independence through physical strength is powerful in its own right. I don't think I'm alone in feeling that I often get messages from my culture that my body doesn't really belong to me: that I'm too fat or too skinny, or that I need to buy a certain product in order to be good enough, or that I have to follow a certain social script to be accepted. Yoga is the only form of exercise (at least the way we've come to practice it) that asks us to continually pause, breathe, and check in with how each shape feels in our bodies as we move. This connects us with our instincts, and thus cultivates an intelligence and power that comes from within, not from without.

A "yoga body" then, is not necessarily one that fits some external mold of what a healthy person should look like, nor is it necessarily an authentic expression of a five thousand year old spiritual lineage. The true "yoga body," then, may be the practice of listening, learning, and personal sacredness: it's your body, right now.

— JC PETERS



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# The Transformation of *Yoga in America*

A NEW STUDY AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY UNCOVERS  
THE EVOLUTION OF YOGA IN THE WESTERN WORLD

## TODAY, YOGA SEEMS AS MUCH

a part of U.S. culture and fitness as aerobics and spin class. For the next generation, it will feel as if yoga has always been here, as our children grow up watching and imitating our attempts at half moon pose and downward facing dog.

The beauty of yoga lies in its multi-faceted benefits, capable of meeting the spiritual, medical and fitness needs of its practitioners. Because of this, yoga will continue to attract a wide variety of faithful followers.

**Whether you lean toward the spiritual or physical benefits of yoga, you will most likely benefit from the other as well.**

So when did yoga migrate to the West? And how has it transformed since it got here? These questions were the focus of a fascinating new study conducted by researchers at Chapman University in California.

Sources trace a boom in Western awareness of yoga just after the first World Parliament of Religions event

in Chicago in 1893, when Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda gave his famous speech of religious acceptance and tolerance.

“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth,” said Vivekananda into the microphone. “They have filled the earth with

**“Yoga, an ancient but perfect science, deals with the evolution of humanity. This evolution includes all aspects of one’s being, from bodily health to self realization. Yoga means union — the union of body with consciousness and consciousness with the soul. Yoga cultivates the ways of maintaining a balanced attitude in day to day life and endows skill in the performance of one’s actions.”**

— B.K.S. IYENGAR



violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.”

The Chicago event marked a pivotal moment in history, as several different religions and spiritual communities from the east and west united around a common commitment to justice and peace.

Soon after, the Eastern practice of yoga began to gently bloom in spots around America. During this grass-roots period, and throughout the first half of the 20th century, there was a stronger emphasis on yoga’s spiritual, philosophical and mystical roots. Practitioners tended to focus on Raja yoga (the mental science) rather than Hatha yoga (physical yoga).

As the 1960s rolled around, awareness was growing of yoga’s physical health benefits as well, and the practice was slowly becoming ‘demystified.’ By the 1970’s, yoga was getting backed by science, and it was becoming a key player in the arena of mind-body medicine, particularly as a treatment for

young people gripped by the current drug culture.

Today, the practice of yoga is in full force and continues to grow and adapt to a variety of needs. The Chapman researchers categorize yoga into three basic approaches: spiritual, medical, and fitness.

The spiritual approach is structured around the goal of enlightenment, with gurus as leaders. This is practiced and reached through meditation, chanting and the readings of religious texts aimed at raising self-awareness.

The medical approach, rooted in scientific study, focuses on the health benefits of yoga. Instructors are considered healers who guide patients in how to manage pain, recover from injuries and prevent health problems. This approach became institutionalized with the founding of the government’s Complementary and Alternative Medicine agency in 1998. At this time, health practitioners and insurance companies began to recognize yoga as a type of therapy.

The fitness approach, rooted in kinesiology, is structured around

the physical benefits of yoga. Many practice this type of yoga as a way to condition and tone their bodies and to help improve their performance in other types of sports. This branch is extremely popular today as fitness centers offer yoga along with other types of physical training methods. By 2002, yoga was the third most popular class at fitness centers, following personal and group strength training.

Whether you lean toward the spiritual or physical benefits of yoga, you will most likely benefit from the other as well. As B.K.S. Iyengar, founder of Iyengar yoga, said:

“Yoga, an ancient but perfect science, deals with the evolution of humanity. This evolution includes all aspects of one’s being, from bodily health to self realization. Yoga means union - the union of body with consciousness and consciousness with the soul. Yoga cultivates the ways of maintaining a balanced attitude in day to day life and endows skill in the performance of one’s actions.”

— TRACI PEDERSON

# Practical Yoga: *Catch Your Breath*

USE THIS SIMPLE PRACTICE TO CALM YOUR BREATH AND CALM YOUR MIND

**AS A TEACHER, MY SIMPLE PURPOSE** is to help you live a happier, healthier, and more spirited life, regardless of whether you practice yoga or not. As a yogi and teacher, I offer tips and inspiration to help you find ways to make the techniques found in yoga more practical in your daily routines.

Students often ask how yoga might be able to help one “keep up” in today’s fast-paced world. That’s an important question. In our society, we’re required to take in extraordinary amounts of data on a daily basis. Phone calls, texting, email, television, internet surfing, and workplace requirements all have our nervous systems on constant “go.” It can be a challenge for us to simply catch our breath.

Yet it’s important to put things in perspective. First, it’s valuable to remember that some stress is actually good for us. Certain levels of stress actually increase mental acuity and bring us to peak performance. We feel more alive when we are under a bit of pressure. Too much stress however, can cause us emotional distress, often presenting itself as physical and mental ailments. It is all about finding balance, and we are the only ones who can gauge that balance in our lives.

This is where yoga can help.

Yoga reminds us that our wisdom is always available. Even though postures like Downward Dog (Adho Muka Svanasana) and Warrior II (Virabhadrasana II) might not be acceptable during a board meeting at work, many of the breathing techniques and mental perspectives gained through the practice of yoga can help us in many ways beyond our mats.

But what is yoga? Is it simply a series of postures to make us sweat? At its core, this 5,000-year-old practice is about stilling the mind. Paradoxically, this stillness simultaneously allows us to see clearly and listen to the still-small voice within us that urges us on to live our lives to the fullest.

In the seminal text on yoga, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipka*, it is said that “when the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed, the mind will be still, and the yogi achieves long life. Therefore, one should learn to control the breath.”

So let’s take some time to catch our breath and experience some yoga right now.

**As you focus on your breath, allow your facial muscles to soften. Let go of all your cares as you inhale and exhale. Try it for a few moments, or for up to three minutes. Notice how it makes you feel.**

Wherever you are, if you can, sit for just a moment and take a few steady, deep breaths. Inhale slowly through the nose to a full breath, hold for about three seconds, and exhale slowly through the nose, pressing gently at the navel center to complete the exhale.

Use your mind’s eye: As you inhale, feel as if you are sipping from an infinite pool of life force. Imagine healing energy (yogis call this prana) entering your body and making its way to every cell. As you exhale, continue to use your imagination to see stress and tension leave your body. (Perhaps you see an image of a balloon deflating; use whatever image works for you).

As you focus on your breath, allow your facial muscles to soften. Let go of all your cares as you inhale and exhale. Try it for a few moments, or for up to three minutes. Notice how it makes you feel.

Breathing techniques are one of the most potent, and portable, tools found in yoga. Yogi Bhajan, the renowned Kundalini Yoga master, has said that the only difference between an enlightened teacher and a student is that the teacher is aware of every one of their breaths.

So, even if you don’t attend yoga classes, ask yourself this: What is it that is holding you back from feeling fully alive right now? Remember that your breath is a key component to living with vitality and clarity.

May this breathing technique be the first of many healthy steps for you to “catch your breath” and find yourself fully alive.

—WILL DONNELLY

# *Drishti*: Ancient Yoga Technique for Balance, Vision, and Focus

USE THE POWER OF A STEADY GAZE TO HELP GUIDE YOUR PRACTICE

**EVER HEARD THE SAYING.** “Where your attention goes, energy flows”? This phrase is extremely helpful not only during yoga practice, but in life in general. When we practice yoga asana, our attention should be on the practice itself—our body, alignment, breathing, and connection to the divine. In life, it should be on present moment awareness.

Often, in yoga class we can become distracted by things like lululemon’s new see through pants on the person in front of us, the clock on the wall, or even the hot guy in warrior pose—throwing our practice and balance way off.

It was best put by Guruji K. Pattabhi Jois who said, “Yoga is an internal practice, the rest is just a circus.”

## WHAT IS A DRISHTI?

Drishti is an ancient yoga technique that focuses the eyes on a certain unmoving point in a particular posture. We see why this concept is so important in balancing postures, for example. If your attention is on another person or a moving object, we’re more likely to fall out of the pose or become unstable and wobbly.

Have you ever been deeply immersed in a daydream and someone waves their hand in front of your face, yet your eyes stay fixed in one position? Your eyes are locked, but you’re awareness is elsewhere. In those moments, we are beyond the sense of sight. The only difference is in yoga, it’s a conscious decision—using discipline to keep the eyes in a fixed position (yet the awareness is vast).

## WAYS TO USE A DRISHTI

We see drishti’s used in many different forms. In the Ashtanga tradition, there are 9 points of focus for the eyes. For example, the tip of the nose in mountain pose, between the eyebrows and inward at the third eye point during meditation, the navel in downward-facing dog, the hand in Triangle Pose, the toes in seated forward bend, far to the right and left in spinal twists, the thumbs for the first movement in sun salutations, and up to the sky into infinity in Warrior I. These not only serve as exercise for the eyes, but also correct the postural alignment and organize our prana (energy).

During Bikram’s yoga, I often hear teachers say, “Soft gaze on the horizon”—meaning imagine or visualize the horizon is in front of you (my favorite drishti!)

Trataka is an eye cleansing technique in Hatha Yoga that improves concentration and vision. It includes gazing at a

“Fixing the gaze...not only concentrates the mind but draws our energy inward along with it, extending the action of pratyahara, or the yogic internalization of the prana and the senses.”

candle flame until the eyes water—bathing and cleansing the eyes. It is also a way to become aware of unconscious urges and movements such as blinking.

## DRISHTI FOR KIDS

The minute I taught my kids drishti, their balancing abilities increased 10 fold (and so did their meditation practice). Kids have a tendency to twitch, wiggle, and move a lot during yoga and meditation. Drishti is one of the single most important tools to improve stillness. It also develops something called ekagraha or single-pointed focus, which is typically a challenge, not only for our eyes, but in everyday life.

My son said, “It’s like having a staring contest with the wall.” Funny, however, it’s more like having a staring contest with yourself, yet it’s not a wide-eyed piercing stare—it’s a relaxed even slightly blurred gaze.

## ULTIMATE GOAL OF USING A DRISHTI

Vedic expert Dr. David Frawley wrote, “Fixing the gaze...not only concentrates the mind but draws our energy inward along with it, extending the action of pratyahara, or the yogic internalization of the prana and the senses.”

Training your body to do what the mind tells it is very empowering. It also strengthens focus and discipline. Controlling our senses has been used for centuries as a way to transcend—transcend physical pain, transcend the five senses, transcend the illusion of separation, transcend to higher consciousness and oneness.

Drishti is prescribed in the *The Yoga Sutra’s of Patanjali* to improve dharana (concentration) and pratyahara (sense withdrawal). These practices are a guide to ultimately reach samadhi or enlightenment.

So, whether you are trying to achieve such heights or just want to improve your balance—using a drishti is a powerful device toward both.

—BESS O’CONNOR



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# The Secrets of *Your Core*

...OR, WHY YOU DON'T NEED TO PUNCH YOUR YOGA TEACHER

**THE OTHER DAY, MY FRIEND** and yoga teacher Meghan Currie said to me about the core: “There’s just this layer of energetic garbage around your core. You kind of have to burn through it—then you’re good.”

I’ve been telling my students this lately, when I get them on their backs, hands interlaced behind their heads. Ten sets of Ana Forrest style Yogi Bicycles later, I tell them to relax and take a deep breath. “There’s anger in there, there’s shame, and there’s a deep, meaningful, and abiding rage that often manifests as getting mad at your yoga teacher.” And then they all laugh, because it’s true. At least half the class is thinking about punching

my lights out at that moment.

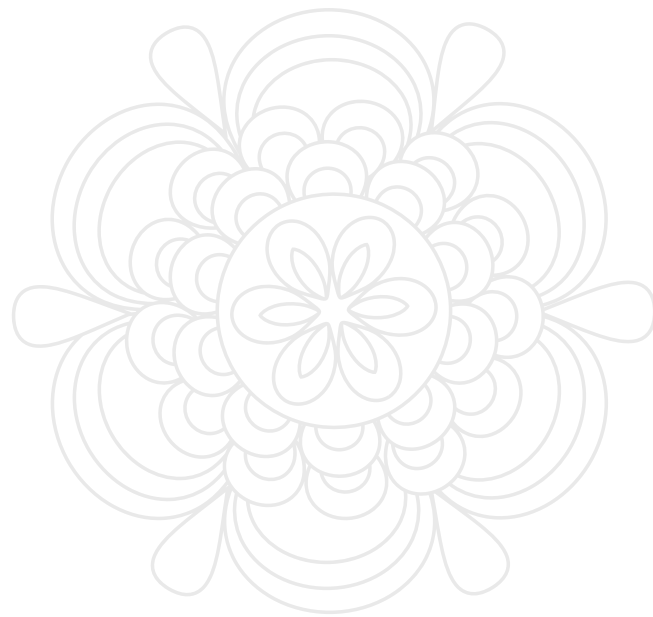
Have you ever noticed that working your core is a totally different uncomfortable than working, say, your thighs or biceps? There’s something about this group of muscles that incites an extremely emotional reaction. I lived in that layer of energetic garbage for a while every time I got on the floor and worked it: the shaking belly, the frustration, the rage, the wondering when I would ever get stronger and WHO CERTIFIED THIS YOGA TEACHER TO BE SUCH A STUPID JERK?!

Then, one day, I did get stronger. Once I realized I wasn’t the only one feeling this way, I relaxed into the work of it and it actually started to feel good. I started to feel more connected

to my strength and willpower, my ability to get things done, to stand up for myself (or on my head) and yes, even to return to those poses that still make me shake.

And shaking is a funny thing—it will still sometimes happen if you’ve been doing core work for 15 years. It means a small muscle somewhere inside of you is trying to turn on but can’t remember how. (Here’s a trick I used once in Dolphin Plank Pose that changed it for me fundamentally: I clenched my belly muscles as hard as I could until I started shaking like a madman, and relaxed back into the pose, and the shaking stopped. I told the muscles what to do, and then relaxed and let them do it.)





And the energetic garbage in our bellies is kind of like that too: It's trying to remember how to do what it's supposed to do, but it's been so long buried down that it can't remember.

All of our lower chakras live in the belly. Chakras are centers of energy in the body that correspond to different physical and emotional states, and the lower ones all relate to our individual, personal, physical experience in the world.

At the pelvic bowl, in the perineum/genital area and into the inner thighs (and not coincidentally right where mulabandha, the yogic "bandha" or energetic lock lives) is Muladhara, where we carry our sense of survival, basic instincts and needs, sense of home and rootedness, as well as our most basic fears.

In the lower belly, connected to the hips, and just under the navel is Svadisthana Chakra, whose name means "sweetness." This chakra is not one that gets a lot of love in our culture: we are talking desire, pleasure, sensuality and sexuality, taste, emotion, and intuition. Our culture's not that cool about sexuality in general, and we often swallow sexual guilt and trauma and leave it here to leak into the hips (yogic "fact": women who

have been sexually traumatized often carry extra weight around the hips, as if to protect their sexual centers. See Debbie Shapiro, *Your Body Speaks Your Mind*). The shame and guilt and pleasure and joy are all jumbled up together in there, and it can be an interesting experience to begin to explore these spaces.

Around the solar plexus, above or right at the navel is Manipura Chakra, or "the lustrous gem." This is our willpower, sense of identity, our ability to manifest the desires and dreams that grow from Svadisthana chakra. This is our ego, our sense of who we are in the world, our ability to stand up for ourselves, but also our insecurities and feelings of powerlessness against a world that mostly controls us, not the other way around. Stimulating this chakra can get us fired up to take care of business, but it can also stir up our rage against the machine.

We spend so much of our time holding our bellies in or clenching our

pelvic floors because we are stressed and scared and don't even know how to relax. We swallow down experiences we can't fully process and hide them in our bellies, trying to make them smaller and harder and less vulnerable. But bellies are meant to be soft: there's a reason these organs are not encased in bone like our lungs and our brain. They are meant to be massaged and explored and twisted and stretched and released. When core work is done correctly, it can wake up sleeping muscles and release what's overworked and holding emotion. Which is why, on that tenth Yogi Bicycle, you start to want to kick your yoga teacher in the teeth.

Please don't kick me in the teeth, though. Take a deep breath and let it come. Relax your belly and allow yourself to feel. Then get back on the bicycle and get to know your belly. It just might be trying to tell you something.

— JC PETERS

**When core work is done correctly, it can wake up sleeping muscles and release what's overworked and holding emotion.**



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# How to Develop a *Home Yoga Practice*

Don't Miss 'What To Include in Your Home Practice' on the next page

## A GUIDE TO THE ULTIMATE HOME PRACTICE

**I USED TO THINK HAVING** a home practice meant I had to get up at 4 a.m. to chant mantras, meditate, and practice asana for two hours. I am not a morning person.

Also I love going to public classes. I love learning from different teachers, getting adjustments, and being with community. But there are always days when you just can't get to your regular class, when you are traveling away from teachers and studios you trust, or maybe you just want to find out what happens when no one is telling you what to do, which is always an interesting experiment.

The first step of developing a home practice is taking the pressure off. You do not need to practice for two hours, you do not need to do anything specific or in any specific order, and you do not need to get up at 4 a.m. Unless, of course, you are a morning person.

Sometimes I make a delicious mess: I put on music I would never play at a studio (hello, Yeah Yeah Yeahs), I jump around my mat exploring transitions and variations, I forget what I've done from one side to the other, and I remind myself of the strange dancing caterpillars from my favorite 1974 nature documentary *Animals are Beautiful People*. Rolling around doing your own wild thing can be highly informative and entertaining.

However, there are several ways to explore a home practice depending on your tendencies and what you need that

day. If you are newer to yoga, are unsure of alignment, or want inspiration from experienced teachers, yoga DVDs are great. I also highly recommend My Yoga Online, which has many different teachers and styles of classes including full intermediate practices and 10-minute sequences for when you are short on time.

If you know your basic safe alignment, and find yourself getting impatient with recordings and turning them off halfway through (I am the worst when it comes to that), then you may need to explore your inner wild thing. Put on some music and see what happens.

Need to feel a bit more grounded? It's easy to create a complete, organized practice yourself. On the next page, I share my own practice (and teaching) skeleton for a self-designed class. I've divided it into ordered "chunks" so you can plug in the specific poses you want to work on. As always, check with your doctor before you try any new kind of exercise, and I recommend these poses only if you know how to do them safely.

Remember that your home practice is your own personal laboratory, and you'll develop your own style as you go. Home practice is a precious opportunity to have fun, get to know your body and your mind better, and, if necessary, roll around doing your own wild thing.

— JC PETERS



# What to include in Your *Home Practice*

## CHUNK NO. 1: SUN SALUTATIONS

Sun Salutations warm up the body, get the blood moving, and prepare you for the more intense poses that will come later. There are many kinds of Sun Salutations, so do the one you like or know best.

## CHUNK NO. 2: CORE

Throw it in there, even if it's just one plank pose held for five breaths. This helps wake up the inner body, which will support you through what comes next.

## CHUNK NO. 3: STANDING SERIES: OPEN HIPS

Link together a few "open hip" poses. These include Warrior 2, Side Angle pose, Triangle pose, Goddess pose, and Tree pose. A good general rule is to link no more than three poses before you do them on the other side. If you like, you can add a Vinyasa in between, or reset with Downward Dog or Tadasana for a few breaths.

## CHUNK NO. 4: STANDING SERIES: NEUTRAL HIPS

"Neutral hip" poses include Warrior 1, lunges, Pyramid Pose, Warrior 3, and standing splits. Chunks No. 3 and No. 4 can be reversed; it's useful to consider what you plan to do next. Does your "peak" pose, if you are doing one (see No. 5), have neutral or open hips? Usually inversions and backbends have neutral hip rotation, and it can help to do poses in a similar orientation right before your peak.

## CHUNK NO. 5: PEAK

This is also the energetic "peak" of your practice, which could mean anything: perhaps a challenging pose you've been working up to, or simply the end of the standing series. There's no need to focus on a specific pose unless you want to.

## CHUNK NO. 6: BACKBENDS

Backbends feel so good after working the hips and core in the previous poses. I would recommend cooling down right after backbends partly because their adrenal squeeze will give you a rush of energy, and then, often, jelly legs. Inversions like headstand, for example, are generally safer before deep backbends.

## CHUNK NO. 7: TRANSITIONAL POSES

Neutralize your spine before you go anywhere else. Happy Baby pose, supine or seated twists, and Child's pose are great.

## CHUNK NO. 8: COOL DOWN

I have a sequencing theory that I call "Teaching as Storytelling." As part of that theory, I call this part of class the "denouement," which is a narrative term that literally means the "untying of knots." Here, through cooling and calming poses, we can release any tension we may have cultivated and reset the nervous system. Some examples of calming poses are forward folds, seated or supine hip openers, and shoulderstand if you are comfortable with it.

## CHUNK NO. 9: SAVASANA

This is the most important aspect of any yoga practice. Savasana processes and integrates all the work you've done, and releases whatever needs letting go. Set a timer for at least five minutes and enjoy a well-earned rest!



# Sun Salutations:

## *A Dance With the Breath*

SALUTING THE SUN WITHIN THROUGH AN ANCIENT SEQUENCE

**WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT YOGA**, they often speak about it like a love affair: how things changed once they “found” yoga, and that they’d never go back to life without it. There’s a certain ecstasy that can be found in the yoga practice, a moment here and there when everything in your world falls away, and suddenly, you are dancing.

The ancient yogic sages have always known there was something about the breath that contributes to this ecstasy. Our English words anger and anxiety come from the Greek root *ankhōne*, which means “a strangling” or “to be without breath.” Perhaps the magic of yoga happens simply when the breath and the body can connect without any struggling or “strangling.”

In yoga philosophy there is a principle called Shakti. This divine feminine energy is what gives life to everything, what animates the world and creates the *spanda*, or pulsation, of life that is always in a process of being born or dying. Shakti is the energy in everything, and Shiva, the masculine

principle, is what gives that energy its form. Neither can exist without the other. When we connect breath and body, we are bringing Shiva and Shakti together in an incredibly simple but deeply profound way.

I’ve come to understand the intention of the ubiquitous Sun Salutations as nothing other than the creation of this connection. There are many versions of the Sun Salutations, and my favorite is Surya Namaskar C: a beautiful, flowing sequence that I learned via yoga teacher Shiva Rea, and which I’d like to share with you.

When we practice this sequence, we are inviting the breath—the Shakti—into the room so she can stay with us as we explore the form and other aspects of our yoga or simply as we enter into the rest of our day. As you move through this, allow the inhales to feel like the crests of a wave, and the exhales the valleys. Waves don’t stop, they don’t freeze mid-motion, they literally just go with the flow. Listen to the oceanlike sound of your breath, and let it lead you in the dance. As always, check with your doctor before trying anything new if you have any health concerns.

— JC PETERS

### *Surya Namaskar C*

1. Inhale and reach your arms up.
2. Exhale as you hinge from your hips to fold earthwards.
3. Swell your heart halfway up as you press your hands into your shins or the mat, creating a long spine.
4. Exhale your right foot to the back of your mat and lower your knee down. The core will engage as you complete your exhale.
5. The inhale waves your heart and hands towards the sky for Low Lunge pose, or *anjaneyasana*. Savor the moment at the top of your breath, the peak of your wave.
6. When the exhale comes, plant your palms to the mat and step to Downward Dog.
7. The inhale swells your heart forward to Plank pose, or the top of a pushup.
8. Exhale to your snake belly, using your knees if you like. Your elbows should stay over your wrists, so your arms move through a 90-degree angle as you come forward and down.
9. Untuck your toes and inhale your cobra heart forward and up, rolling your shoulders onto your back.
10. Exhale all the way back to Downward Dog by bringing your hips to your heels, and then unfolding your legs towards straight.
11. Inhale your right leg into the sky. Your exhale slowly pendulums the foot between your hands. Lower your back knee down.
12. Inhale to Low Lunge on this side. Savour the top of your inhale as you reach up.
13. Exhale your hands down, and step your feet to the top of your mat.
14. Halfway lift on your inhale.
15. Exhale and release to the earth again.
16. Inhale all the way up to standing.
17. Exhale your hands at your heart in *Anjali mudra*, palms touching.
18. Repeat this sequence at least one more time, leading with the left foot.

Rinse and repeat as many times as you like. Especially if you are new to moving in this way, it may take a while for the breath connection to feel natural. One day, when it does, even if it’s just for a moment, you’ll forget everything else, and I hope you can hold your breath against your precious body and dance, dance.

# Yoga on the Go: *Moon Salutation*

SLOW DOWN AND HONOR THE MOON WITH THIS FLOWING MOON SALUTATION

**THERE IS DEFINITELY A SPECIFIC PLEASURE** in taking a public yoga class: listening to the wisdom of the teacher, exploring new postures, and simply being in the studio space with the instant community created. You just can't replace that experience.

However, there are times in life when you need yoga and a drop-in class is not a possibility—situations where just a little bit of movement can make a really big difference, and you may not even have a yoga mat at your

disposal. Perhaps you crave a break during a long-distance cycling trip, or need to get out of your head and step away from your desk on a busy workday, or maybe you were too busy to get to class and want to stretch out and calm down before you go to bed.

All it takes is a few postures to release muscle tension, lower blood pressure, reset the mind, and help with digestion and immune function. (Additional yogi secret: it can help with hangovers, too!)

Modified from the beautiful Moon Salutation, or Chandra Namaskar,

the sequence is a calming alternative to the energizing Sun Salutation, and it traces a large circle with the body, indicating the shape of a ripe full moon. It is recommended as an aid to sleep, but I use it whenever I can't make it to my mat. A bonus for this modification is that it is easy on the knees and the wrists, and is accessible to many levels of ability; plus, it's lovely if you are pregnant or menstruating. As always, check with your doctor if you have any specific health concerns.

— JC PETERS

## *Adapted Moon Salutation*

**1. Half Moon Pose:** From a standing position, feet parallel and hip-distance apart, inhale your arms up and interlace your fingers, keeping your indexfingers reaching up. As you exhale, lean over to the right for a side bend. Inhale back up to standing and exhale to the left. Inhale back up through center and release your hands.

**2. Goddess Pose:** Exhale to step your right leg out to the right about three feet, and turn both of your toes out at a 45-degree angle. Inhale your arms up then exhale to bend your knees and elbows into Goddess Pose or High Malasana.

**3. Triangle Pose:** Inhale your legs to straight, and turn your right foot out and your left foot in a little bit, so that your right heel is in line with your left inner arch. As you exhale, lean your body to the right for Triangle Pose, so your right arm reaches down toward your toes and the left arm goes straight up toward the ceiling.

**4. Pyramid Pose:** Inhale in Triangle pose, then exhale and bow over your straight front leg, which is called Pyramid Pose. Now both hands are pointing towards the floor: they may touch down, but you can also hold your hands on your hips.

**5. Low Lunge:** Exhale to step your back foot a little farther behind you, optionally lowering your knee down to the floor. Stay on fingertips on either side of your front foot, keeping your shin directly over the ankle. Inhale and stretch your hips and chest forward.

**6. Wide-legged Forward Fold:** As you exhale, walk your hands to the inside of your front leg and toward the midpoint between your legs. As you do, carefully parallel your feet and straighten

your legs so you are in a Wide-legged Forward Fold. Hands can touch down or dangle, or you can hold opposite elbows. I like to hold this inversion for a few breaths.

**7. Low Lunge:** Take a halfway lift as you inhale, and turn towards your left foot, turning it out to the left as you come onto the ball of your right foot so you are in a low lunge on the other side. Inhale to stretch your chest and hips forward.

**8. Pyramid Pose:** As you exhale, step your back foot in about a foot closer and place the heel down as you straighten both legs for Pyramid Pose on the left side.

**9. Triangle Pose:** On an inhale, reach your right arm straight up for Triangle Pose, turning your torso toward the side wall.

**10. Goddess Pose:** Inhale both arms up and turn both feet out to 45-degree angles. As you exhale, bend your knees and elbows into the cactus shape for Goddess Pose.

**11. Half Moon Pose:** Inhale the arms up and the legs to straight, and step your left foot in to meet your right one so you return to standing at the opposite end of your mat from where you started. Exhale to side bend to the left, inhale back to center, and then exhale to side bend to the right. Now step the left foot out to the left and repeat the sequence in the opposite direction.

Having moved through the revolutions of this sequence, you've stretched out your quadriceps, hamstrings, and back, including a gentle inversion that releases strain in the neck and helps to calm the body. The physical experience of moving through a cycle has a deep sense of completion to it, and you may find your mind is much calmer and more collected. Now you've got some yoga in your pocket, and you can take it anywhere you need to go.

# Quick and Dirty Yoga: Detox and Cleanse Yoga Sequence

BOOST YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM WITH THIS DETOXING AND REVITALIZING SET OF POSTURES

**IT'S A NEW YEAR**, and we could all use a little help to cleanse, detoxify, and boost our immune systems. One of the ways the body cleanses itself is through the lymphatic system. Lymph nodes in the neck, armpits, and groin don't have an internal pump system the way the heart does, so to move lymph, we must move the body. Twists and inversions also stimulate digestion and circulation. Each pose may be held for 5-25 breaths.

Check with your doctor if you have any health concerns. This sequence is not appropriate for pregnancy. — JC PETERS

## Detox and Cleanse Sequence

### 1. Cat/Cow

On hands and knees, inhale into a backbend, lifting your tailbone and chin towards the sky, and as you exhale, round the spine, pointing the tailbone and chin down. Continue with your breath.

### 2. Downward Dog

From hands and knees, walk your hands farther forward and lift your hips up and back so you make the shape of an inverted V.

### 3. Revolved Lunge

Step your right foot forward, keeping the knee over the ankle, and lower your back knee down. Take the hands into prayer and twist so that your left elbow hooks onto your right thigh. Optionally lift your back knee. When you are ready, switch sides.

### 4. Pigeon Pose

From Downward Dog, lay your right shin behind your hands, avoiding any pain in the knee. Your left leg stretches straight back behind you. You may fold forward. Switch sides when you are ready.

### 5. Inversion 1: Headstand or Legs Up the Wall

Headstand is counterindicated if you have neck, shoulder, or eye pressure issues or if when menstruating. Legs Up the Wall is a great alternative: bring your bum up close to the wall and swing your legs up.

For Headstand, come to your knees and forearms and interlace your fingers. Place the crown of your head down so you can feel your wrists touching your head and see your elbows in your

peripheral vision. Lift your knees and walk the feet as close to your face as possible. Lift one leg at a time. Afterwards, rest in Child's Pose.

### 6. Inversion 2: Shoulderstand or Supported Bridge

If Shoulderstand is not appropriate (for the same reasons as Headstand), try Supported Bridge: lay on your back with your knees bent, feet on the floor. Lift your hips and place a block or bolster under the back of your pelvis. Widen your feet so the knees can rest against each other and relax.

For Shoulderstand, lay on your back with your legs extended up. Swing your legs toward you and catch your lower back with your hands. Work your hips over your shoulders, legs extending up, and shuffle your shoulders as close to each other as possible.

### 7. Plow Pose or Forward Fold

For Forward Fold, come to a seat and extend your legs straight out in front of you. Keep your spine long as you fold over your legs.

From Shoulderstand, come into Plow: let your legs come over your head towards the floor. In Sanskrit, Plow pose is Halasana or "poison removing pose."

### 8. Fish Pose

Gently return to your back and bring your thumbs to touch, palms facing down, under your bum. Lengthen the legs onto the floor in front of you and squeeze them together. Lift your chest and head off the floor so the crown of your head rests lightly on the floor.

**At last: Savasana.** Having rinsed everything out, enjoy a few minutes of rest lying flat on the earth.

# Yoga for *Releasing Anger*

FIRST UNDERSTAND YOUR ANGER, THEN GET ON THE MAT AND LET IT GO

**ANGER: WE ALL KNOW IT**, many of us well. But at a yoga party, it would be gauche to bring up the raging intensity sitting in your gut. We're all focusing on the positive here, right?

Not exactly. Yoga is in part a practice for life. It's natural and normal to feel anger, and yoga can help us find the compassionate action that the anger is sometimes trying to point us toward.

Anger comes in different forms. Empowering anger is a galvanizing force: It has a clarity like a laser beam, reveals injustice, and gives us an Incredible Hulk-like disdain for consequences. Empowering anger says, "Why have I been so worried about rocking the boat? There ain't no more boat to rock!"

Disempowering anger is a bitterness that buries itself deep in our guts, disguising the powerlessness, fear, or grief that live in its kernel. This kind of anger is confusing, and its



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actions are rarely compassionate. Sometimes this bitterness remains after empowering anger has come and gone. You may have done your best to fight injustice, but afterwards injustice still exists.

The mindfulness practice of yoga can help us discern what we are feeling: Is this anger empowering or disempowering? It can also physically move excess energy, especially

when we stimulate Manipura Chakra, an energy center located in the solar plexus. It's right where you feel anger, fear, and anxiety. The following practices can help direct you away from confusion and toward clarity and compassionate action. As always, check with your doctor if you are pregnant or have other concerns.

— JC PETERS

## *Practice for Releasing Anger*

**1. Vigorous movement:** get thee to Power yoga. Heat, sweating, and deep breathing give the fire what it wants. Trying to "just breathe" and sit still may only harden it into bitter coal.

**2. Abdominal work:** All core work stimulates Manipura chakra. My favorite is scissor kicks:

- Lay on your back with your hands behind your head, and your legs raised straight up to the ceiling.
- Inhale while raising your shoulders up, exhale while raising your tailbone up, avoiding swinging your legs towards your face, and stay.
- Exhale and extend your right leg straight out in front of you, bringing

your right elbow towards your straight left leg. Inhale while returning back to center and repeat on the left.

- Keep moving with your breath, or begin to switch your legs as fast as you can, twisting at the belly. Keep your legs straight and the breath strong and even. Try to switch 20 or 30 times. When you come back down and release your legs to the floor, you will feel a glowing fire right in your solar plexus.

**3. The Woodchopper:** Stand with your feet shoulders distance apart, knees slightly bent. Interlace your fingers and bring them up over your head as if you

were holding an axe. Imagine what you'd like to chop. Give it something tangible that your blade could destroy. Bring your hands down hard and yell HA! as loud as you can—this is the mantra of Manipura chakra. Do it as many times as you want, as loud as you can. When you feel complete, stand softly with your eyes closed.

After any of these practices be open to what comes next. Journaling can help clarify what you feel. If you start to cry, try not to hold anything back: the intention is to unstuck the energy. You may feel clean and clear or you may discover there is something you need to do. Trust your instincts. You have all the courage you need.



# Yoga for Chronic Pain: *Part 1*

A CALMING PRACTICE MAY HELP REWIRE YOUR BRAIN SO THAT YOU EXPERIENCE LESS PAIN

## YOGA AS AN EMBODIED MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

has the potential to change your brain. You can become aware of samskaras, habits or patterns, and discover tools to change them. Chronic pain, researchers are discovering, may work very much like a habit that's been created between the body and the brain, sometimes long after the initial injury or trauma has been healed.

Pain is incredibly useful: it tells us that something is wrong. Sometimes, however, pain receptors collect around an area of trauma and start acting like overprotective mama bears: they ring the pain alarm bells both for mild external stimulus and internal triggers like stress and exhaustion.

Ideally, we flow in a balanced way between our sympathetic nervous system, the “fight or flight” state which helps us manage various forms of stress, and the parasympathetic nervous system, the “rest and digest” state where we heal,

repair, and process our experiences. In a world where the standard response to “How are you?” is evolving from “Fine” to “Busy!” we rarely enter completely into the rest state. Stress sticks around when we don't need it, which can reinforce our pain patterns.

A calming yoga practice encourages the brain to create a new samskara: the more you relax, the easier it is to access relaxation. As yoga teacher Pattabhi Jois famously said, “Practice, and all is coming!”

These four restorative yoga postures, if possible paired with a warm, dark, and quiet environment, will trigger your relaxation response. Allow yourself to fully experience any moment of softness, rest, quiet, and ease, even if there is also some pain. Stay in the poses as long as you like (at least five minutes) and skip any that don't feel comfortable. The intention here is to feel good!

— JC PETERS

## 4 Restorative Poses for Chronic Pain

### 1. Constructive Rest Pose

Lie on your back with your knees bent and resting on each other, feet on the floor, hands on your belly. Relax your belly so that the breath feels invited there; it will come if it's invited. This relaxed breath indicates to your body that you are safe.

### 2. The Massage Table

Lie with your chest and hips on a long bolster. Support your forehead on a soft block

or blanket so there is space to breathe. The gentle bow of your head is calming for the mind. Prop your ankles with a blanket.

### 3. Restorative Twist

Sit with a bolster or long pillow extending out from your right hip. Knees can stay stacked, or slide your left knee back in line with your right foot (deer pose). Lay your belly down on the bolster and turn your head

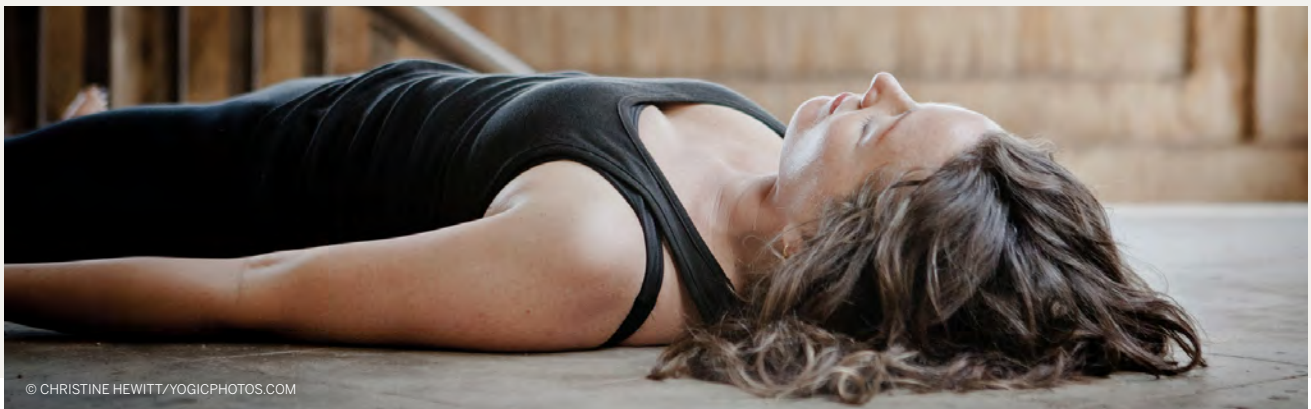
in whichever direction feels better. Arms can rest in a cactus shape. Switch sides at some point. In general, flexion helps trigger the relaxation response, and this pose creates a gentle inward bend for your elbows, knees, and spine. Twists are also generally calming and grounding.

### 4. The Beach Chair

Set up two blocks in an L shape and lean your bolster or pillow on them (you can also elevate the top of the bolster with extra pillows). Lay back on your makeshift beach chair, and support under your

knees with a rolled blanket or pillow. This gentle chest opening can elevate your mood, and create more space for a deep belly breath.

As you move through the sequence, pay attention to what feels good, calm, easeful, and pain free. Paying attention to these experiences encourages your brain to rewire towards them. Next time, we will explore some poses that can gently invite the sympathetic nervous system back into the practice without, ideally, triggering a pain response.



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# Yoga for Chronic Pain: *Part 2*

EXPLORE ACTIVATING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM TO HELP COMBAT CHRONIC PAIN

**PAIN IS IMPORTANT:** it tells us that something is wrong. As I discussed in the last article, however, many of us live with chronic pain that is not a danger signal, but rather a pattern in the brain that is connected with stress. Managing stress, for example through Restorative yoga, has been shown to be very helpful for chronic pain sufferers.

Of course, if the only solution to dealing with chronic pain was eradicating stress, we'd all be in trouble. Stress is a fact of life, and we need it in balance with rest to survive and thrive.

Ideally, we slide between the parasympathetic (relaxed, rest) and sympathetic (active, stress) nervous system states. What may be most important for chronic pain sufferers is learning what triggers each state so that we have some tools at the ready when pain flares up.

As discussed in Part 1, some triggers for the rest state are a warm, dark, quiet environment, slowness, focusing on the exhale, and gentle flexion (forward folding) of the joints. The active state is stimulated by bright light, quick movements, focusing on the inhale, and extension of the joints (such as backbending). A rounded yoga

practice includes both stimulating and calming postures to tone and rebalance the nervous system.

The following sequence will mildly stimulate the active state. As you try it, work within a place where there is no real danger (check with your doctor if you are unsure), and observe your body's responses. You may activate your pain as you experiment, which is totally normal, and why we learn tools that will calm us down when it happens. Feel free to return to the Restorative practice in Part 1 at any time. Be willing to poke at your edge, but don't force yourself through pain.

— JC PETERS

## Gentle Flow for Chronic Pain

### 1. Cat/Cow

Come to hands and knees, fingers spread under your shoulders, knees under your hips. As you inhale, backbend gently, opening up the front side of your body from pubic bone to chin. As you exhale, round your spine, curling your tailbone and chin in towards each other. Connecting movement with a smooth, slow breath can be very calming as we explore both flexion and extension of the spine.

### 2. Flowing Warrior

Stand with your feet 3-4 feet apart, right foot pointing towards the short edge of your mat, left foot towards the long edge. As you inhale, reach both arms up, both legs straight. Exhale to Warrior 2, bending your right knee in line with your ankle, lowering your arms to parallel with the earth. Inhale back to the starting position, and repeat 3-5 times, then switch legs. Lifting the arms above the head can be a great mood-lifter: yoga teacher B.K.S Iyengar has famously said, "Open your armpits, and you will never be depressed!"

### 3. Standing Forward Bend

Stand with your feet parallel, about hips distance apart. Fold over your legs and let your hands and head hang down, relaxed, towards the earth. Knees should never be locked; bend them



until there is no discomfort in your lower back. If the Flowing Warrior was stimulating, the flexion and inversion aspects of this pose should calm the nervous system again.

After the sequence, take a moment to sit or lie down quietly and reflect. Try to focus on what felt good. As you explore triggers for both rest and stress with mindfulness, you empower yourself with tools to rewire your brain and manage your pain.

# A Body at *Rest*

RESTORATIVE YOGA TRIGGERS YOUR RELAXATION RESPONSE;  
LEARN HOW TO PRACTICE WITH SWEET SURRENDER

**I WAS HAVING COFFEE** with an old friend when I found myself interrupted—repeatedly—by a series of “helpful” reminders and messages from my smartphone. With each blrrpt, boop, and ping, my breath caught, my neck muscles tightened, and my jaw clenched.

This unconscious gripping is the work of the autonomic nervous system, or “fight-or-flight” response. Though few of us will face an actual saber-toothed tiger, the body’s ancient physical reaction to attack remains a default setting in stress-filled modern times, says Judith Hanson Lasater, a teacher of restorative yoga.

But our intelligent human bodies also possess the ability to shut down an overactive stress response, she says. The parasympathetic nervous system triggers the “rest-and-digest” mode: the heart rate decreases, muscles relax, breathing slows, and blood pressure drops. Ahhh . . .

Fortunately, we can learn to

activate the triggers that tell our bodies it’s time to slow down. And with a little practice, we can train ourselves to remain in that relaxed state long term, Lasater says. The practice uses props and long, mostly supine, holds to passively open the body.

“Deep relaxation is not a pill to take, it is a powerful choice to make,” she says. “We can change our mental state through our body and consciously choose a different way.”

Try these steps to get your body to “rest and digest”:

- **Lying in child’s pose**, rest the center of your forehead on a yoga block. Putting pressure on the “third eye” stimulates the vagus nerve, the body’s main messenger to the parasympathetic nervous system, regulating relaxation, heart rate, digestion, sleep, and well-being, Lasater says.
- **Use an eye pillow.** The body’s oculocardiac reflex, stimulated by gentle pressure on the eyeballs, is another “rest-and-digest” trigger.

- **Take slow, deep belly breaths.** This movement in the diaphragm stimulates the relaxation response, allowing neuroreceptors to send your brain messages that it’s time for the body to relax.
- **Chant a mantra, like Om.** Mantra chanting vibrates the muscles in the ear, face, and throat, which stimulate the vagus nerve for relaxation.
- **Practice pratyahara—closing off the senses** (including all stimulation through the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth) to enjoy a deep internal state. Rest in child’s pose or simply lie on the floor with an eye pillow covering your eyes. Lasater says that specific poses don’t matter as much as duration—she recommends lying down in a still, quiet, dark, and warm place and resting for a minimum of 15–20 minutes a day.

Say *Ahhh*...

— JACKIE ASHTON

## Take your relaxation practice deeper

Restorative yoga incorporates physical supports, to reduce stress on the body, notes San Francisco-based instructor Stephanie Snyder. “It helps slow us down enough to remember that we are all connected and supported.” She recommends five poses for relaxation; each should be held for at least five minutes of rest.

### Viparita Karani

Place a low bolster or block under the pelvis and lie back supine on the floor, eyes closed, with legs resting flat against a wall, making about a 90-degree angle with your body.

### Supta Baddha Konasana

Sit at the top of the mat and place a bolster lengthwise behind you at the small of your back. Bring the soles of your feet together, knees opened out to the sides. Place a block under each knee for support. Slowly recline back over the bolster and close your eyes.

### Supported Reclining Twist

Sit at a 90-degree angle to a bolster, left hip touching the bolster, legs straight. Fold left leg under right, and place a blanket between your thighs. With hips square, recline your torso straight down over the bolster, resting your arms on either side. Repeat on the opposite side.

### Upavistha Konasana

From a seated position, open straight legs as wide as possible without strain. Elevate the pelvis by sitting on a blanket if feeling stiff. Place a bolster directly in front of you, narrow end forward. With a long, straight spine, slowly walk the hands forward to lie on the bolster.

### Savasana

Tuck a bolster under the knees, and gently recline to lie flat on your back. Use an eye pillow; Rest here for 10 minutes or more.



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