



# Karuna Yoga Newsletter

Issue No: 4

April 2007

Spring has arrived and this is a good time for cleansing the body. Postures that help to cleanse are all the inverted postures and the twists. The posture of the month is the Sun Salutation, which includes inverted postures when the head is lower than the hips, as in Downward Dog. At this time of year many people are clearing their gardens and preparing them for the summer. Gardening often aggravates an existing back problem, especially a condition known as sciatica.

## What Is Sciatica?

Sciatica occurs due to compression and inflammation of the spinal nerves. The sciatic nerves are the body's two largest nerves. They are about as thick as your little finger and emanate from the lower lumbar spine. They thread through the buttocks down the back of each leg to the soles of the feet and big toes. Pain occurs when the nerve fibres become pinched or irritated. Sciatic pains are never the same. The pain can feel like a dull soreness, numbness or tingling, or more like an electric shock or stabbing pain. It can begin as an annoying ache that makes it uncomfortable to sit and at times the sensations can be so intense that it is impossible to walk or stand. An episode can last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. A common culprit for sciatic pain is a herniated disk (sometimes referred to as a ruptured disk, pinched nerve or slipped disk). This can happen due to an injury or trauma, long bouts of physical activity such as long distance cyclists or simply from years of constant bending or sitting for long periods.

## Yoga For Sciatica

Many people have found that yoga has helped to reduce the pain of sciatica. Using the Iyengar method of yoga it is possible to bring the sciatica under control but it is also possible to cure the sciatica with yoga. This is not something you can accomplish in a few weeks, or even months. Everyone is different and it may take six months to one year to be able to control the sciatica. Enjoy the yoga and don't think of curing the sciatica as being your main aim. Concentrate on stretching correctly and being in proper alignment and the benefits of yoga will follow. Everyone's sciatica is different so the following three steps should be considered in every posture:

**Step 1 - Pacify the pain.** Take pressure off the sciatic nerve and rest the lumbar spine by using a variety of props common in the Iyengar tradition: belts, blocks, chairs, bolsters, and walls. Props provide traction, which releases any pain or discomfort, and they also help educate the body and mind about what it's supposed to feel like.

**Step 2 - Understand proper alignment.** Your pelvis and spine work together to ensure proper alignment. Misalignment can cause pressure on the sciatic nerve. Using props helps the body understand proper alignment. Also ensure that in standing postures you keep your feet flat on the floor, each knee facing in the direction of the toes, and let the hips move naturally. Don't force the hips into a movement or position they are not ready for.

**Step 3 - Build muscle strength to maintain alignment.** To build strength, increase the repetitions of the postures, or hold them longer, or both. You can do this while you learn to align your pelvis and spine in step 2. But you may need to just focus on your alignment first—anywhere from six months to a year—before you are ready to build strength.

I have a lesson plan designed specifically to help alleviate sciatic pain and which incorporates the three steps above. I will let you know when I next intend teaching this class and I have a copy of the specific postures available on request. It is best to do these postures under supervision for a few months to ensure correct alignment of the pelvis and spine.

## Posture of the Month: Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation)

Our primary source of light is, of course, the sun. Everything that exists originates from the sun. For thousands of years the Hindus have revered the sun, which they call *Surya*, as both the physical and spiritual heart of our world and the creator of all life itself. The Sanskrit word *Namaskar* means 'to bow' or 'to adore'.

One way of honouring the sun is through the dynamic asana sequence *Surya Namaskar*, better known as Sun Salutation. The Sun Salutation originated at least 2,500 years ago as a ritual prostration to the dawn. However old Sun Salutation is, many variations have evolved over the years and the most popular sequence consists of eight different postures, always starting and ending in Tadasana. Nowadays, Sun Salutation is used mostly as a warm-up at the start of each yoga class or, on days when only a quickie practice is possible, an intense ten-minute Sun Salutation and five minutes in Savasana (Relaxation) is a good option. (Continued over)

Contact Lynne at [lynne.gully@iremia.net](mailto:lynne.gully@iremia.net) or Tel: 28920 42356

## Sun Salutation Sequence - Surya Namaskar

The transition from posture to posture is facilitated by either an inhalation or an exhalation; each posture counteracting the one before, stretching the body in a different way and alternately expanding and contracting your chest to regulate your breathing.



Start in **Tadasana** (Mountain Posture) with your hands together at your heart centre. Exhale.



Inhale and lift your arms overhead into **Urdhva Hastasana** (Upward Salute).



Exhale while lowering your arms down and fold your torso into **Uttanasana** (Standing Forward Bend). If your hands do not touch the floor then bend your knees and hold onto your shins.

Inhale and arch your torso, fingertips or palms to the floor (or continue holding onto your shins), raise your head and look forward.

Exhale and put your palms onto the mat, bending your knees if necessary.

Inhale and as you exhale bring your right foot back followed by your left foot, keeping your feet hip width apart, into **Plank**. Inhale.



**Intermediates** exhale and lower your body into **Chaturanga Dandasana** (Four-Limbed Staff Pose); **Beginners** bend your knees and lower your chest to the mat keeping the pelvis raised.



**Intermediates** inhale into **Urdhva Mukha Svanasana** (Upward Dog); **Beginners** extend your arms along the mat, press into your palms and raise your head and chest as far as is comfortable for you.



Exhale into **Adho Mukha Svanasana** (Downward Dog). **Intermediates** stay here for five full breaths; **Beginners** stay here for three full breaths building up to five breaths in time.

Inhale and raise your head and as you exhale bring your right foot forward, then your left foot into **Uttanasana** (Standing Forward Bend).

Inhale and lift your torso, reaching your arms up overhead into **Urdhva Hastasana** (Upward Salute).

Exhale and end in **Tadasana** (Mountain Posture) with your palms together at the heart centre.

For beginners to yoga it will be necessary to practice each individual posture before we attempt a full Sun Salutation sequence. If the Sun Salutation is practised daily, it will bring great flexibility to your spine and joints and trim your waist. A daily practice, understandably, isn't always possible, but try and aim for at least three times a week. At first, practise slowly doing three sequences, gradually increasing to five, and then even ten once your body becomes stronger over the coming months. Due to the flowing, graceful nature of the sequence, each posture is held for a short time. And remember, don't push yourself too much. If three repetitions are too many for you then choose a comfortable amount to begin with and increase it over time.

The above sequence is Surya Namaskar A. There is also a second sequence called Surya Namaskar B, which I will teach once everyone is comfortable with the first sequence.