



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

Issue no: 18

September 2008

Yin Yoga

Welcome back to my newsletters after the summer break. In my last newsletter, written in June, I wrote about the importance of stretching the hamstring muscles. I hope you have been taking time to improve your hamstring flexibility by working on stretching the legs using a belt.

During the summer break I have been doing more Yin Yoga in order to stretch the connective tissue. The hamstrings, for example, are layered with lots of tough connective tissue – the gristly fibres that help hold the muscles' structure together. You can't force the hamstrings into being more flexible. They need time to change their length. The longer stretches seem to be most effective with connective tissue in all parts of the body.

Yin Yoga is not another brand name for Yoga postures. Most forms of Yoga practiced today are Yang, emphasising muscular movement and contraction. By contrast Yin Yoga targets the connective tissue of the hips, pelvis and lower spine. Yin postures are held three to five to ten minutes at a time. This type of practice compliments the more muscular styles of Yoga and is a great aid for learning to sit in meditation.

Yin Yoga contains the ancient, and some say original, form of asana practice. The sages who pioneered the path of yoga used asanas to strengthen the body, so that they could sit for long periods in contemplative meditation. If you have ever sat for a long time with legs crossed, you know the hips and lower back need to be strong and open. The sensations you felt were deep in the connective tissues and the joints. These are the deep yin tissues of the body, relative to the more superficial yang tissues of muscles and skin. Yin Yoga opens up these deep, dense, rarely touched areas.

Recently Yin Yoga has been "re-discovered", and more and more students of yoga are adding this challenging form of practice to their regular yoga practice. Years of a dedicated asana practice will make anyone healthier, stronger, and more flexible, but at some point the muscles will have reached their limit of flexibility. New depths in postures, deeper ranges of motion, or an increased flow of energy may only be achievable by focusing on the deeper tissues of the body. This is why so many students are finding Yin Yoga to be the perfect compliment and balance to their more active, yang practices.

At the beginning of every class I will continue to teach the basic stretching postures but we will be holding some of them for longer in order to stretch the connective tissue. This will help to improve your yoga practice over time as not only will your body open up in different places but you will learn to breathe more effectively. As I have said many times, in yoga it is important to move with the breath.

Contact Lynne at lynne.gully@iremia.net or Tel +302892042356

Posture of the Month – Janu Sirsasana (Head on knee)

In Sanskrit, the word for “knee” is *janu*, while “head” translates as *sirsa*. Practising this head-on-knee posture has a dynamic impact on the body and has many benefits. It stretches the front of the spine, eases stiffness in the muscles of the legs, and in the hip joints. It increases the flexibility of all the joints of the arms, from the shoulders to the knuckles. Forward bends like Janu Sirsasana rest the frontal brain and heart.

1. Sit in Dandasana with your legs together, your back straight and your hands at the sides of your hips.
2. Stretch your heels, ensuring that both are pressed down.
3. Take a few deep breaths.
4. Bend your right knee and bring your right foot up to your right buttock. Allow your knee to drop outwards to the right and place the sole of your right foot against the inside of your left thigh. Keep your left leg straight and your left foot flexed.
5. Make sure you are sitting on your inner buttock bones and that your weight is distributed equally on them. Do not allow either buttock to rise off the floor.
6. **Intermediates:** lift your arms straight up above your head with your palms facing each other. Stretch your torso up from the hips. Continue the stretch through your shoulders and arms. Exhale and bend forward from your hips, keeping your lower back flat. Stretch your arms toward your left foot and hold the toes.
7. **Beginners:** If you are not ready to reach your toes, then place a belt around your left foot. Stretch your torso up from the hips, exhale and bend forward from your hips, keeping your lower back flat. Keep holding the belt around your foot and do not pull yourself further forward. Keep your breath slow and steady.
8. **Intermediates:** Now increase the stretch. Exhale and extend your arms so you are now holding the sides of the left foot. Stretch your spine and do not round your back. Lengthen and flatten your lower spine and extend your arms out from your shoulder blades.
9. Inhale and come out of the posture.
10. Come back to Dandasana before doing the other side.
11. Repeat this posture on the other side by bending the left leg

Cautions

- To protect your hamstring muscles from damage, always open out the knee of the outstretched leg completely, extending it evenly on all sides
- Do not allow the thigh of the same leg to lift off the floor

Benefits of this posture

- Eases the effects of stress on the heart and the mind
- Stabilises blood pressure
- Gradually corrects curvature of the spine and rounded shoulders
- Eases stiffness in the shoulder, hip, elbow, wrist and finger joints
- Tones the abdominal organs
- Relieves stiffness in the legs and strengthens the muscles of the legs
- Vitalises the adrenal gland and relaxes the thyroid gland

