



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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What Is Yoga? Part 2

In last month's newsletter I explained that Yoga means different things to different people. Most people know that the practice of yoga makes the body strong and flexible so many people practise yoga simply to keep fit. Yoga also improves the functioning of the respiratory, circulatory, digestive and hormonal systems. Yoga also brings emotional stability and clarity of mind but that is only the beginning of the journey to *samadhi* or self-realisation, which is the ultimate aim of yoga.

Here are some other reasons why people practice yoga:

- A process of self-understanding and self-development
- Freedom from suffering on all levels – physical and emotional disturbances
- An increase in health and happiness
- An increase in self-confidence and well-being

Yoga is an ancient art based on an extremely subtle science, that of the body, mind and soul. The prolonged practice of yoga will, in time, lead you to a sense of peace and a feeling of being one with your environment.

Yoga also helps you to live day-to-day life without aches and pains and to recharge the organs of the body so that they exemplify health.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

Just to remind you that the eight limbs or steps of yoga are yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi. In last month's newsletter I wrote about Yama, the first limb or step.

Niyama (the second limb or step)

Niyama, as with Yama, requires tremendous inner discipline. It is the positive energy that brings discipline, removes inertia, and gives shape to the inner desire to follow the yogic path. Developing your own personal meditation practice or making a habit of taking contemplative walks alone are examples of niyamas in practice.

The five niyamas are:

Saucha: cleanliness

Santosa: contentment

Tapas: heat; spiritual austerities

Svadyaya: study of one's own self, which includes the body, mind, intellect and ego.

Ishvara pranidhana: devotion to universal love

Contentment or *santosa* helps to curb desire, anger, ambition and greed.

Tapas or austerity involves self-discipline and the desire to purify the body, senses and mind.

Posture of the Month – Adhomukha Svanasana (Down dog)

In this asana, your body takes the shape of a dog stretching itself. *Adhomukha* means to have your “face downward” in Sanskrit, and *svana* translates as “dog”. The asana helps runners, as it reduces stiffness in the heels, and makes the legs strong and agile. Holding the posture for one minute restores energy when you are tired. This asana gently stimulates your nervous system and regular practice will rejuvenate your whole body.

This inverted stretch brings fresh blood to the heart as well as the lungs, increasing the fitness of the entire body.

Technique

1. Go onto your hands and knees on your mat. Make sure that the distance between your feet is the same as that between your hands.
2. Spread your fingers as wide as possible with your middle finger pointing forward. Keep your hands flat by pressing down onto the base of each finger and thumb.
3. Curl your toes under and as you exhale press into your toes and hands and slowly lift your hips.
4. Stay on your toes and lift your sitting bones as high as possible. Keep your feet parallel to each other.
5. Tighten the muscles at the top of your thighs and pull your kneecaps in.
6. Stretch the arches of your feet and slowly bring your heels down to the floor.
7. Pull your inner arms up from the elbows to the shoulders.
8. Move your torso toward your legs and feel the stretch from your palms to your heels.
9. Feel the energy in the spine flowing upward, from the neck to the buttocks.
10. Tuck in your shoulder blades and broaden your chest. As your chest opens out, your breathing becomes deep.
11. Stay in the posture for 30 seconds.
12. To come out of the posture slowly bend your knees onto your mat. Sit back onto your heels and rest in pose of the child.

Cautions

Do not practise this asana in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Beginners should not hold the final posture for more than 30 seconds, gradually increasing the duration to 1 minute.

Benefits of this posture

- Calms the brain and gently stimulates the nerves
- Stabilises blood pressure and heart rate
- Reduces stiffness in the shoulder blades and arthritis in the shoulder joints
- Strengthens the ankles and tones the legs
- Strengthens the arches of the feet and prevents calcaneal spurs
- Helps to prevent hot flushes during menopause
- Reduces lower backache
- Counters the damage to the cartilage of the knee or hamstring muscles caused by jogging, walking or other sports
- Helps relieve chronic constipation and indigestion



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