



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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What Is Yoga? Part 4

I hope you are enjoying the newsletters about “what is yoga” and the explanations of the eight limbs of yoga. We all take something different from our yoga practice. Some people like a quiet practice staying longer in postures to feel a sense of peace and relaxation. Other people prefer doing a more active asana practice to lift their spirits and to feel a surge of energy.

It is always good to balance your asana practice by starting with postures that stretch different parts of your body. Every posture we do is a preparation for the next posture. We would never start our practice with a difficult backbend but would do various postures to open our bodies in preparation for the ultimate backbend. Enjoy your asana practice by being in the present moment and not thinking of the next posture. Breathe well and enjoy every posture knowing it is having a good effect on your body and your mind.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

Now we continue with the fourth limb. I have already written about Yama, Niyama and Asana. The fourth limb or step is pranayama or yoga breathing techniques.

Pranayama

The ancient yogis advocated the practice of pranayama to unite the breath with the mind. *Prana* is energy and *ayama* is the storing and distribution of that energy. By practicing pranayama we learn to move energy vertically, horizontally and cyclically to the frontiers of the body.

What do we know about breathing? We all have to breathe to stay alive but we all have a unique breathing behavior or breathing identity. Some of us are very efficient breathers while others aren't. It may be that you have a condition that contributes to inefficient breathing. You may have a poor posture with a stiff or sunken rib cage. You may have weak, uncoordinated or constricted respiratory muscles. If you are an inefficient breather you are likely to be breathing too shallowly, high in the chest and breathing through your mouth.

The practice of pranayama will teach you how to breath in and out through the nose slowing down the breath. This gives the lungs enough time to extract the maximum amount of oxygen and energy from each breath. An efficient breather is much calmer and more clearheaded, and probably healthier and happier than an inefficient breather.

This month we will practice various pranayama techniques taking it slowly and carefully. We will learn to relax the facial muscles and how to increase the length of each inhalation and exhalation without force and to bring calmness in to the body and mind.

Posture of the Month – Bakasana

Baka means a crane. The body in this posture resembles that of a crane wading in a pool of water. We will enter this posture from another posture called Malasana, which is a squatting posture.

Technique

1. Squat down into Malasana with your inner feet a few inches apart. If it isn't possible to keep your heels on the floor, support them on a block or two. Separate your knees wider than your hips and lean the torso forward, between the inner thighs. Press your elbows against your inner knees, bringing your palms to together and resist the knees into the elbows.
2. Then stretch your arms forward and take your arms around the outside of your shins. Press your fingertips to the floor, or reach around the outside of your ankles and hold your back heels. Stay for 5 breaths.
3. To come into Bakasana, stretch your arms forward, bend your elbows, placing your hands on the floor and the backs of the upper arms against the shins.
4. Press 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.
5. 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 posture, you might want to stop here, perched securely on the bent arms.
6. Stay in the posture anywhere from 20 seconds to 1 minute. To release, exhale and slowly lower your feet to the floor, back into a squat.

Beginner's Tip

A partner can help you learn to balance in Bakasana. Squat in the ready position, hands on the floor, up on the balls of your feet. Have the partner stand in front of you. As you lean forward your partner will support your shoulders with their hands, to prevent you from toppling forward onto your face or head.

Cautions

Do not practice this posture if you have carpal tunnel syndrome or if you are pregnant. Be careful if you have any knee problems.

Benefits of this posture

- Stretches the ankles in the squat
- Strengthens arms and wrists
- Stretches the upper back
- Strengthens the abdominal muscles
- Opens the groins
- Tones the abdominal organs



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