



Karuna Yoga Newsletter

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The Importance of Stretching

In last month's newsletter I suggested that you always start your yoga practice by gently stretching your spine. The spine does not have its own circulation system so moving the spine helps to move the spinal fluid. This keeps the spine young and healthy.

The next important step in your yoga practice is to stretch various muscles so that you can fully enjoy doing the postures. The hamstrings are muscles that are located at the back of the thighs. Many people have tight hamstrings especially if they cycle regularly or go on long walks. Tight hamstrings are often the cause of lower back problems as the hamstrings pull on the lower back. Stretching out the hamstrings is one of the most important stretches you can do. The hamstrings affect so many postures. When you do forward bends either standing or sitting, you can feel the hamstrings stretching.

Stretching The Hamstrings

- ❖ Lie down on your back and make sure you have a belt or a long scarf. A yoga belt is the best thing to use.
- ❖ Bend your right knee onto your chest and then place the belt around your right foot. Keep your left leg straight along the mat.
- ❖ Slowly straighten your right leg and feel the stretch in your hamstrings.
- ❖ Stay in this position for a few minutes feeling the hamstrings slowly stretching and lengthening. As the hamstrings stretch you can bring your leg closer towards you.
- ❖ Make sure you stretch both legs for an equal length of time.

Feel The Power of the Stretch

When you stretch feel the power of the stretch to the tips of your fingers, into your back leg and down into your feet. All the body parts work together. Create a dynamic extension from the core of your being. When you stretch your arms your chest should also stretch. Do not overstretch or under stretch. Stretching the nerve endings throws out stored impurities.

Achieving a Good Posture

The asanas (postures) should feel light not heavy. When you relax into an asana, there is no fatigue. Do not try to achieve any particular asana prematurely. We all need to take the journey towards the final asana, lengthening and stretching until the asana feels right for us.

Always be happy with the smallest improvement. Be happy with your progress and be aware of how much your body has opened up since you first started to practice yoga. In every class try and do a little bit more than you think you can.

Success in yoga is achieved through practice. Find time to stretch for even a few minutes every day. Just remember that as we open into postures, so we open our minds.

Posture of the Month

Utthita Parsvakonasana

In Sanskrit, Utthita means 'stretch', Parsva means 'side' or 'flank', while kona is an 'angle'. This is the extended side stretch posture. In this posture, both sides of your body are stretched intensely, from the toes of one foot to the fingertips of the opposite hand. Remember to keep your body absolutely steady when practising this asana.

Technique

1. Stand in Tadasana (mountain posture). Inhale and as you exhale jump or step your legs wide apart. Raise your arms sideways in line with your shoulders, palms facing down.
2. Turn your left foot in and your right foot out keeping your left leg stretched out and tightened at the knee.
3. Inhale and as you exhale bend your right knee keeping your knee in line with your foot. Ensure that your knee stays above your ankle. **Beginners** – bend your knee as far as is comfortable taking your thigh as low as possible. **Intermediates** – bend your knee until the thigh and calf form a right angle and the right thigh is parallel to the floor.
4. **Beginners** – rest your right forearm on your right thigh. Place your left hand on your hip. Roll your left shoulder back to open up the front of the body. If your shoulder and neck feel okay, lift your left arm and stretch it straight out over your left ear, keeping your head up. **Intermediates** – place your right palm on the floor by the side of your foot or onto a brick or block. Only go as far as your front body stays open. Lift your left arm and stretch it straight out over your left ear, keeping your head up.
5. Pull up your left quad muscle at the front of your thigh and press the outer edge of your left foot onto the floor. The chest, hips and legs should be in a line and you are stretching every part of your body, especially the spine.
6. Stay in this posture for five breaths, breathing deeply and evenly.
7. Pull up the mula bandha, and with an inhalation, come out of the posture by lowering the arm and straightening the right leg.
8. Repeat on the opposite side.
9. Exhale as you jump or step back into Tadasana.
10. Rest in Tadasana for at least five breaths before starting another posture.

Partner Work

Have your partner stand at your back leg, facing you, and loop a strap around your back inner groin (she can also brace your back heel with the inside of one foot). As you bend the front knee your partner should firmly pull the strap against the inner groin, resisting it opposite to the movement of the front leg. Then as you lean to the bent-knee side, she should continue to pull on the strap, helping you to keep your weight back, on the back leg and heel.

Benefits of this posture

- Strengthens and stretches the ankles, knees and thighs
- Stretches the groins, spine, waist, chest and lungs
- Enhances lung capacity
- Increases stamina
- Tones the muscles of the heart
- Reduces fat around the waist and hips
- Relieves sciatic and arthritic pains
- Stimulates abdominal organs
- Improves digestion and increases peristaltic activity.



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