

## SECTION NINE

### YOGA FOR LIFE

There are many reasons why people come to yoga: some regard it as a form of exercise whereby they can become more flexible, others are attracted intellectually by the philosophy, some find the practice relaxing, and there are those who are drawn to it as a means of developing their spiritual practice. Yoga will satisfy all these needs, according to what the individual is seeking, which is why there are so many different approaches and emphases. No matter what route or path is taken benefits accrue through the practice. However, when yoga becomes a way of life it becomes you.



If Life can be described essentially as movement between two points, then posture is shaped movement. Like the pause between the inhalation and exhalation, any posture is simply movement at rest. All posture whether classical yoga or natural body positioning needs to be comfortable with smooth transitions in between. For ease of external movement, the energy needs to continue flowing internally. We can sit motionless but, inside, life continues to flow as involuntary movement (the heartbeat, the breathing, the brain's electrical activity, expansion-contraction at cellular level). And for the body to be supple the spine has to be able to release – continuously.

When the human body is aligned correctly, external forces or energies such as gravity, can act upon it efficiently and the entire organism is wholly at

ease. When it is mis-aligned we suffer from discomfort and the organism is occupied in endeavour to rebalance. Yoga teaches awareness of body and mind so that natural adjustments can take place to restore harmony. Without the awareness, the body's capacity for free movement is either limited or only ever a potential. On the one hand the body fidgets and struggles to find a comfortable position, which dissipates energy and leads

to premature ageing and chronic dis-ease. On the other hand, never discovering the body's natural capacity is like trying to drive a car in neutral; the journey is unfulfilled. We will never know of what we are capable unless we allow ourselves the magic of self-discovery.

Yoga is for everyone: all that is required is a body, the ground, the gravitational pull, the breath and the attention. The attention is the key without which everything remains potential instead of actual experience.

Attention is unforced, it observes rather than censors, and it never interferes. The most difficult part of yoga practice is to resist doing anything to alter what is present. If our powers of observation show us one shoulder lifted higher than the other it is very difficult not to make an adjustment.

Of course we can impose our will and force the body to conform to a predetermined pattern; try anything hard enough and there is often the power to succeed, but the price is high. We end up adding more stress to an already stressed organism or situation until we reach breaking point. This is not yoga, it is ambition, and its power derives from concentration not attention.

Doing nothing when we have been raised from infancy to do something is almost impossible at first, but with patience, we learn the wisdom of just watching and waiting. The body, in its own time, at its own pace, given the opportunity and means will right itself. The wisdom is already there in the cells and it unfolds from within, out.

The joy of witnessing this happening is indescribable, and incredibly powerful. Which is why the ego, at first, feels slighted: it has had to relinquish its control. This is what the mystics from the Buddha, to Jesus and Mohammed, and many before them and still more to come after them, mean when they speak of "letting go". Trust, yielding to some other power, does not sit well with our ego. Its nature is designed to organise and alter whatever does not suit it. This is the illusion, the maya so frequently referred to by the texts, prophets and gurus. This power higher than the ego does not have to be sought for

the simple reason it is already there, within us, waiting to be accessed. There is nothing to prove just everything to see.

Naturally, if a body is missing a limb or has had corrective surgery, no amount of attention will alter that, which is not to say that this body cannot reorganise itself and rebalance to whatever capacity it can attain *now*.

At first it is difficult to maintain the attention. Our mind wanders and we appear to lose it but with patience paying attention becomes easier, as the ego grudgingly accepts it and eventually befriends it. If we practise paying attention in all the little everyday activities, it strengthens until we find we are attentive as a matter of course.

The kitchen is an ideal place for practice simply because meal preparation involves us so intimately in the world outside our self: it is a hands-on experience of colour, texture, shape, tastes, sounds and smells. All the senses are heightened to a degree I have not discovered elsewhere. Whether I am cooking or on my mat I am practising yoga, so long as I am paying full attention. Without the attention it is just routine, and relatively lifeless.

One of the most frequent comments I hear as a yoga teacher is "I'd love to take up yoga, if only I had the time." Time or lack of it seems to be one of the main reasons given for not practising; this includes myself and, possibly, other teachers. So I have devised a system for when circumstance does not permit the luxury of a two hour practice, and it can be used by anyone in reasonable health\*, even those who would never consider attending a yoga class but who would appreciate a little more ease in their lives.

\* *Note:* **SAFEGUARDS**

If you have a health problem, have recently undergone surgery, are in the early or latter stages of pregnancy or have any doubts about whether you should embark on an exercise regime, please consult your health practitioner before embarking on any of the outlined programmes.

As a general rule:

People with high blood pressure or heart problems are advised not to take their arms above shoulder level, and should refrain from taking the head below the heart when forward bending.

Diabetics should refrain from strong spinal rotations.

Pregnancy – wait until the beginning of the second trimester before starting the practice, and avoid lying on your back during the third trimester. At ALL stages be guided by your midwife or doctor.

**A BASIC PRACTICE FOR NOVICES  
IN 4 STAGES**



Repeat each stage of the practice at regular intervals until you are familiar with it before moving onto the next stage. It is helpful to practise at the same time each day / week because this establishes a routine like cleaning your teeth. **This practice is not advocated for pregnancy.**

**STAGE 1 Time: 20 minutes**

- If someone can read these instructions to you as you practise so much the better. If not read them through to yourself a few times until you familiarise them to yourself mentally.
- Wear loose comfortable clothing, have the feet bare and ensure you will not be disturbed. Be prepared to move if at any time you become uncomfortable, you can always revert back to the base position.
- Lie on your back and check that your chin can roll down towards your throat without constricting it; if this is impossible or difficult, place a book about 3 cm in depth under the back of your head.
- Rest the centre of the back of your head (the area between your ears) on the floor or the book. Close your eyes and relax your jaw by separating your back teeth slightly. As the chin releases to some extent in the direction of your throat, notice how the upper part of the back of your neck responds. Is it stiff or easy?
- Bend your knees, allowing the heels to come as close to your seat as is comfortable.
- Position the feet so that they face forwards, about hip width apart. Allow them to “find” the floor, their natural home. Check that the pelvis is comfortable. Experiment by slightly turning the fronts of the feet in towards each other; if this feels better leave them there; if it makes no significant difference, turn them forwards again.
- Lift the toes and let them go; allow them to lengthen forwards and feel the pads of the toes softly connect with the floor. Develop a sense of space between and through each toe. Observe where the weight is falling through the foot. Imagine a triangle across the ball of the foot from the base of the big toe to the root of the little toe, and the centre of the base of the heel. Sense the foot being gently pulled from below through the points of this triangle and allow the foot to balance naturally. Remember this may not happen the first time you practise, just observe any resistance to the suggestion.
- When the foot is balanced the ankles will align; you may feel a space or an opening develop at the centre of the top of the ankle. The inner and outer knee will feel parallel and the hips will be drawn down evenly towards the floor.
- The pelvis will begin to feel wider and more spaced. The curve at the back of

the waist (the lumbar spine) will soften and slowly sink down into the floor, making a deeper contact each time you practise. As it lengthens the dilation in the centre of the back of the waist (between lumbar 3 and 4 vertebrae) will open. You may not feel this at first.



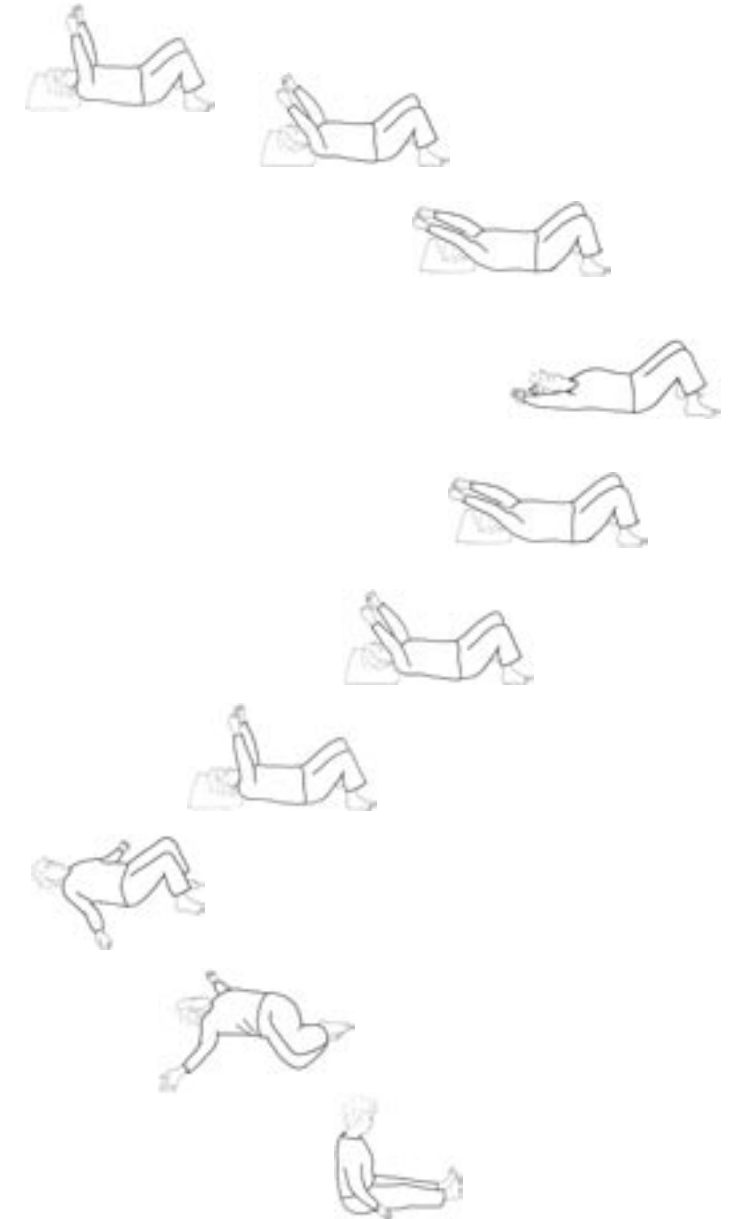
- Check the contact with the floor at the back of the head and the feet and develop a sense of balance. Exhale deeply and release the backs of the shoulders towards the floor, allowing the arms to open outwards and down, palms turned upwards towards the ceiling. Allow the shoulder blades to descend, flatten and widen along the floor. Notice how the base of the neck responds. Feel the spine sinking, lengthening and widening along the ground.
- Tune into your breathing and emphasise the exhalation. No force; just let all the breath go and at the end of the exhalation watch the inhalation come in naturally. Place all your attention in your breathing, allowing the breath out, and allowing it in, observing any pause developing between the two. Become interested in where the breath is going. Allow the incoming breath to find its own way without any interference from you. Notice how the body, maybe shyly at first, begins to follow the breath's lead. Observe what falls and what lifts as you gently and deeply exhale and inhale. Begin to be aware how the breathing is not a local event but a whole body involvement. Tune in to this. Notice the wave like rhythm unfolding. Simply enjoy what you are experiencing.
- When you feel rested, bend your knees to one side and roll over to bring yourself to a sitting position.

## STAGE 2 Time: 20 minutes

Repeat **stage one** omitting the last 2 bullet points.

**Anyone with HBP / heart problems should modify these instructions – release the arms to the floor horizontally not behind the head**

- When the body has softened and a comfortable rhythm has established itself, raise the arms upward towards the ceiling, keeping the backs of the shoulders on the floor and inviting the weight to drop down through the arms into the floor. Exhaling, imagine the weight descending from the fingertips, through the wrists, elbow joints and shoulders; feel the pull of gravity drawing the weight out of the arms. There will be a sense of solidity at the base of the shoulders as the arms lighten. Sense the arms flowering up out of the ground. Imagine a favourite plant and observe how plants are rooted through the pull of gravity: they are held so that the opposing force can carry the stem upward towards the light. Find out if you can experience the arms feather-light, just be that uplifted experience, continuing to exhale the backs of the shoulders into the ground.
- Imagine the arms are on a ratchet, and with each subsequent exhalation let them fall back behind your head – gradually – to the floor. Check that your chin is close to your throat. Notice if the lumbar spine is lifting and, if it is, exhale deeply, inviting it to relax and drop back down into the floor. It may not comply, just observe what is happening.
- When your arms have completed their descent, hold one wrist and turn it away from you. Settle into your breathing pattern, emphasising the exhalation, discovering the extent of the inhalation and witnessing the pauses in between.
- Sense how the breathing pattern becomes circular, with the pauses linking the inhalation with the exhalation and vice versa.
- Slowly allow the arms to lift and bring them back to the floor, or sweep the arms back down by the sides of the body. Bend your knees to one side and come up to sitting.



### STAGE 3 Time: 20 minutes

As for **stage 2** omitting last bullet point

- Feel the back of the body connected with the floor. As you exhale release the weight to the pull of gravity, and on the inhalation feel the support coming back to you from the ground. Confirm this support as you settle into the deep exhalation and the free incoming breath.
- Notice the involuntary movements developing in the body as the spine releases itself along the ground. As you breathe pay particular attention to the exhalations.
- As you exhale, the tail bone and diaphragm separate out from each other, the tailbone moves towards the heels and the diaphragm is sucked back into the chest as it moves in the direction of the back of the head. As a consequence the lumbar spine feels longer.
- As you exhale, the heels drop and the foot lengthens forwards. The weight is pulled strongly down. The feet begin to feel enormous.
- As you exhale, the ankles feel stronger, and this strength is carried through the legs.
- As you exhale, there is a sense of the body weight being drawn down towards the pelvis, down through the outer legs and releasing through the feet into the floor.
- As you exhale, and the weight is drawn down through the outer legs, there is a counter-pull up through the inner ankles and the inner thighs; and the pelvic floor is drawn in the same direction as the diaphragm travelling towards the back of the head.
- As the tailbone and pelvic floor pass each other on the exhalation, there is a slight movement upwards from the sacrum (the centre section of the pelvis that connects the tailbone with the lumbar spine). It feels like the beginnings of a pelvic tilt.
- All these involuntary movements are so subtle you have to pay full attention to them. As you tune in, begin to voluntarily join in the dance. Begin to augment the movement and incorporate your intention with the natural pattern and flow.



- Once you are comfortable and familiar with the directions of movement, exhale, releasing the feet and the shoulders into the floor, and invite the pelvis to float upwards. Follow the tailbone, the sacrum and the pull on the legs. Maintain confidence in the strength of your feet, ankles and knees, and the pull on the backs of your shoulders. Just continue to breathe comfortably, imagining the inhalation as your power source (like fuel for your car) and then utilise this power (the exhalation), releasing the breath down the spine until the pelvis lifts like a plane, skywards.
- This takes time but once the pelvis learns how to float itself upward from the floor it will always be able to do it. If nothing seems to be happening and you become discouraged, give the pelvis a helping hand and consciously raise it slightly off the floor, being aware that you are employing muscles rather than the breath to achieve this. Then try floating the pelvis from there, releasing upwards on the exhalation, relaxing on the subsequent inhalation, and then floating upwards from where you left off on the next exhalation. Once you have the hang of it you will observe the very real difference between physically manoeuvring the body upwards and simply allowing the breath to float it upwards. The feeling will be softer, uncontrived and comfortable, and the feeling will be of being able to maintain the posture indefinitely. If you control it and maintain it with muscular effort you will inevitably feel a real need to let go and come back down. The difference is in the conservation and use of energy.
- Play with this, floating up and coming back down. See where the breath carries you – how you are at any one time will determine the quality of the posture.
- When you are ready to release down, imagine the individual vertebrae of the spine as beads on a string. Bring each bead down separately, sinking the back of the waist into the floor before releasing the pelvis.
- When you have finished playing, bend your knees to one side and roll up into a sitting position.

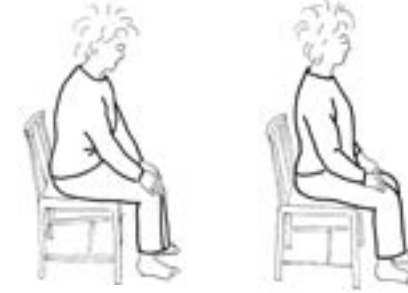
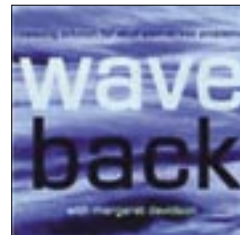
**STAGE 4 Time: 20 minutes**

**Unsuitable for HBP / heart problems**

As for **stage 3** omitting final instruction

- With the back of the body released back into the floor, incorporate the arm movements of **stage 2** with **stage 3** so that the arms begin to lift in tandem with the pelvis.
- As the back arches upwards, allow the arms to release back behind the head.
- Exhaling, feel the lengthening through the upper spine so that the curve in the upper back releases, and the spine between the shoulder blades feels as if it is moving in towards the back of the breastbone.
- Experience the strength in the legs, the toning in the pelvic floor, the softness at the back of the waist, the release in the shoulders, the lift in the chest as the collar bones widen, the comfortable pull at the back of the head and the ease through the neck.
- Notice the softness behind the eyes, the quiet brain, the sense of ease, tranquillity, peace pervading the entire physical structure.
- Release the body down on a long exhalation.
- Play with this and when you are ready, turn the legs to one side, and roll over to come up to sitting.
- Over time, your spine will ease, back problems that have developed through long held patterns of tension will ease or disappear and you will feel stronger mentally, emotionally and physically.
- These are the instructions. You have to practise them.

My CD: **“Wave Back”** would be complementary to this practice and is available from [www.abmworks.f9.co.uk](http://www.abmworks.f9.co.uk)



**ALIGNING THE BODY FROM A SEATED POSITION Time: 15 minutes**

Correct posture allows your body to strengthen naturally. Back problems are endemic in our society today. Try this simple exercise. Not only will you feel taller, you'll lighten up.

- Remove shoes, stockings, tights or socks.
- Sit on a comfortable high backed chair so that the feet are comfortably connected with the floor and you are not resting back into the chair back.
- Ensure that you are sitting on your sitting bones, the bones directly beneath your buttocks, not your sacrum, otherwise you will trap your spine and the idea is to release it.
- Notice exactly how you are sitting, whether your upper back is curved, whether you are slumped, whether your shoulders are relaxed or drooping, whether your head is level or bowed.
- Allow the feet to find the floor. Let them face forward and feel as if they are being pulled from below, across the ball of the foot and the centre of the base of the heel.
- Rest your hands comfortably in your lap.
- Have your chin drawn in, not down, and ensure you are looking straight ahead.
- Check your breathing and focus on breathing out. Exhale as much air as you comfortably can, and just wait for the in-breath to come in. Do not draw a breath in, just let it come to you and follow it until you feel the need to breathe out, then let it go completely.
- After a few breaths your breathing will have slowed to a comfortable rhythm.
- Now, as you continue to breathe in this pattern, allow your body weight to pass down through your pelvis, down your legs and through your feet into the floor on every exhalation.
- As the inhalation comes in allow your spine to begin to lengthen up out of the pelvis towards the back of your head. When you exhale do not slump, keep your spine steady, just let the weight go down.

- On every inhalation let your spine continue its ascent from where it left off, continuing to release the body weight down through the heavy pelvis and into the floor on the exhalation.
- As your spine straightens up towards the back of your head, you will feel longer, and comfortably grounded into the chair and the floor through your sitting bones and feet. Keep feeling the pull on your feet and allow the backs of the heels to roll down into the floor through the centre of the base of the heel.
- Just allow the spine to keep lengthening and relax your shoulders. Your neck should feel soft.
- Then, when you feel your body has naturally reorganised its posture, bring your attention to the tips of your shoulder blades. Invite them to draw down towards the back of your waist and feel them pulling on the backs of your shoulders.
- As the backs of the shoulders open and draw down towards the back of the waist, feel your collar bones (at the front) widen and the chest will lift.
- Feeling uplifted, breathe out and in a few times; then “float up” off your chair with your new body.
- Practise this for a few minutes every day and within a month you should be straightened out.

Remember: “Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.” (Anon.)



### ROTATING THE SPINE FROM A SEATED POSITION Time: 10 minutes

**Not recommended for diabetics / anyone with pancreatitis.**

A lengthened spine loves to rotate, like a plant spiralling upwards. Rotation tones and strengthens the abdominal organs, especially the kidneys.

- Sit sideways on a high backed chair with your right shoulder closest to the chair back and your feet flat on the floor.
- Lengthen your spine according to the instructions above.
- When you feel fully and comfortably lengthened through your spine bring your attention in and **allow** the spine to rotate towards the right. Imagine a vine feeling its way upward around a central pole.
- As the spine rotates from the back of the waist upwards, the shoulders will turn. Allow the spiralling to continue up through the back of the neck, and let your head begin to turn.
- Take hold of the chair-back with your hands, the right hand to the side furthest away, and the left hand to the nearer one. This will stabilise you but be sure to hold the chair lightly, without grasping. **Allow** the chest to be drawn towards the chair-back without pulling.

NB. *It is important to resist using the hands in such a way as to draw or impose movement on the rotating spine.*

Breathe comfortably and on an exhalation allow your spine to unravel and bring you back to base position.

- Notice how you feel and then sit to the other side of the chair and repeat.
- When you return to base, observe how you are contacting the floor through your feet, the chair through your sitting bones. Observe the feelings and sensations in your trunk, abdomen and chest. Is the spine still elevated? Do you feel grounded through your base and uplifted?

Practising sitting on your sitting bones ensures the spine can lengthen. Many people sit on their sacrum and slump. Sitting on the sacrum deadens the sensations and sensitivity of the spine. Remember your spinal cord runs like a telephone cable the whole length of your spine, connecting with the brain.

“Sitting on a dead sacrum causes mental confusion higher up the spine”  
John Stirk F.R.C.O (Osteopath and internationally renowned yoga teacher)