

Yoga to Still the Mind

This Yoga Sequence can be done in as little as ten minutes or it can be stretched out over an hour. Best of all, it will calm your mind.

We all know that yoga makes us feel great in the body, but over time we also notice that it makes us feel much better emotionally and mentally.

And sometimes, that's exactly what we need - a way to still an over-active mind.

I've found it useful in my practice to relate to the elements when I'm working out what I need to do - Earth, Water, Fire & Air.

The mind relates to Air, so when there's too much Mind going on, I like to do a grounding practice - literally, something that brings me back to Earth.

In practice, that means mostly seated postures, held for longer periods of time, and often resting my forehead against a solid surface - whether it's my hands, a bolster or a chair. There's something extraordinarily soothing about pressure on the forehead.

As always though, syncing my breath with my movement is the most important part of my practice - which is why this sequence starts with Tadasana and a simple arm pranayama. Sometimes I might take ten minutes just here, sometimes five breaths is enough.

Aside from awareness of breath, the other key aspect of this sequence is the internal state of being. You want to witness your mind with kindness, compassion and acceptance - as if it was an over-active puppy vying for your attention.

When thoughts arise, see them, release them, and come back to your breath, and awareness of the sensations arising in your body.

Do this over, and over, and over again. In time, with a gentle and consistent approach, your mind will learn that this is a time to still.

Enjoy your practice!

Kara-Leah

1A. Tadasana (Mountain Pose)

Tadasana is a basic standing posture that forms the foundation of many other postures – not just standing poses, but also seated postures. A deep understanding of Tadasana will inform your entire practice.



While it sounds so simple – just stand there – there is a huge difference between an *embodied* Tadasana and merely an *idea* of Tadasana.

Here's how to embody your Tadasana:

Lift up your toes, and spread them wide, feeling all four corners of your feet engaging the ground. Feel your arches naturally lift. Let your toes release onto the ground while maintaining the evenly grounded feet.

Line your ankles, knees and hips up so they stack one on top of the other.

Engage your quadriceps and feel them lifting up toward your pelvis.

Release your pelvis down toward the earth - not tucking your tailbone under, but extending it toward the ground.

Extend your spine toward the sky and broaden your collarbones.

Relax and soften your shoulders, letting the shoulder blades slide down the back of your spine.

1B. Tadasana with Arm Pranayama

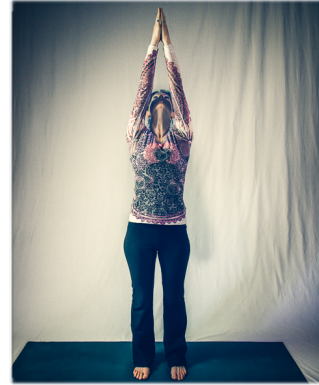
A strong, supple Tadasana is the perfect base posture to explore arm pranayamas. Each of these has a slightly different effect.

Variation #1 is about pulling energy into yourself, drawing it deep within your core. Variation #2 is about connecting to the earth through air.

Maintain awareness of your torso and legs in stillness as your arms move in tandem with your breath.

Be aware of the grounding action through the pelvis, legs and feet, and the ascending, lifting action of the spine.

Arm Pranayama Variation #1:



Arms start at your side. Inhale and extend your arms out sideways, bringing them all the way up until they meet above your head.

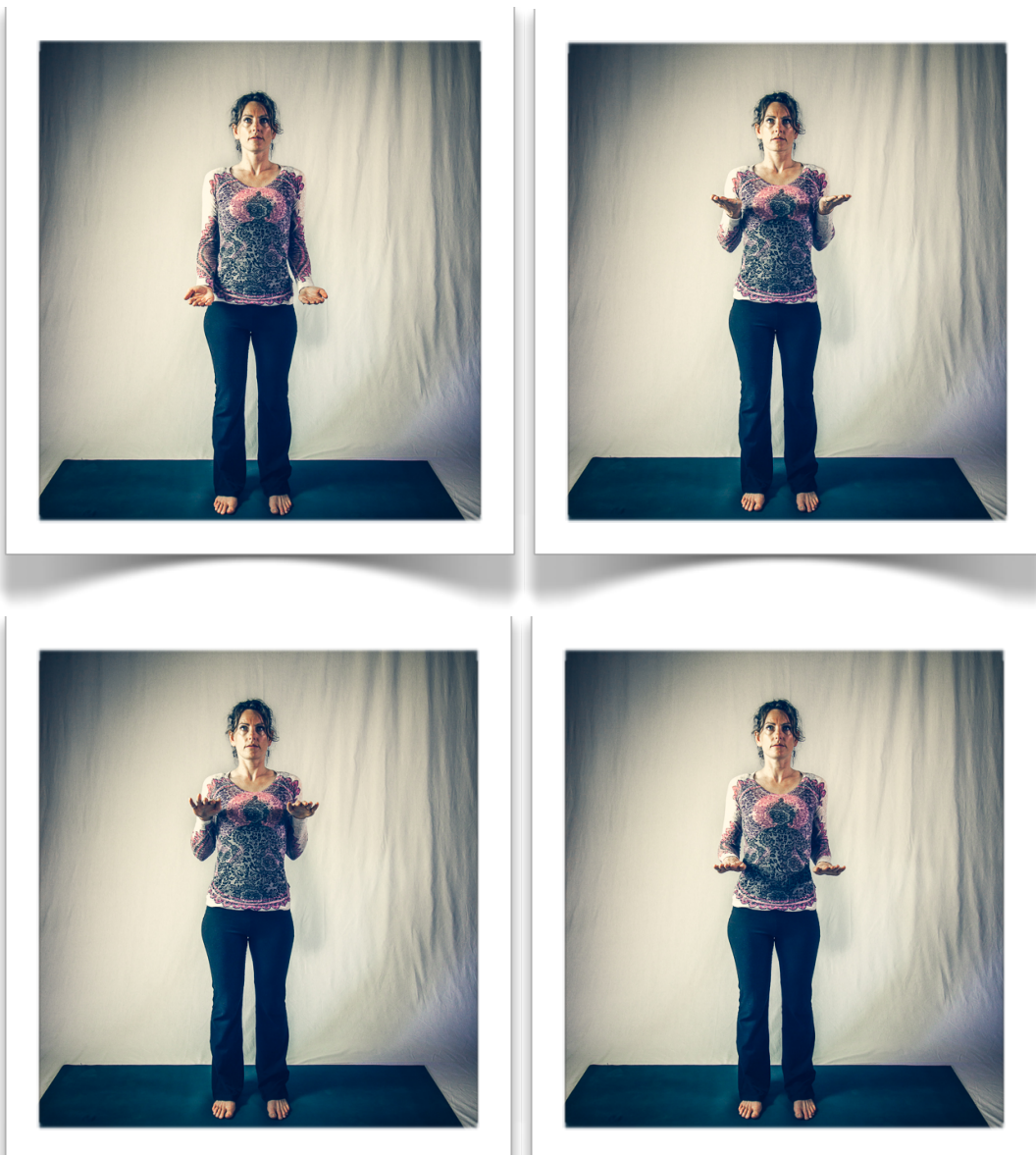
Keep your arms straight and be aware of a straight line of energy moving from the heart, through the shoulders, elbows and wrists.

As you exhale, press your palms together and bring your arms down the centre line of the body. Be aware of drawing energy into your body.

As the exhale ends, begin the inhale again, opening the arms wide.

There is a sense of opening to embrace the world and drawing the world's energy into the body.

Arm Pranayama Variation #2:



Arms hang loose by your sides, palms facing up and elbows slightly bent.

On an inhale, lift your hands up towards the sky to about your armpits.

As you exhale, turn your palms over and press them down into the ground as if you were squashing the air.

Focus more attention on the exhale, releasing the breath and excess energy into the earth.

Take time in both of these Pranayama - yes, they're simple, but also deceptively powerful. Coordination of breath with movement has profound energetic affects on our body.

Initially, you may play with both of these variations to see how different they feel from each other. Later, as you get more of a sense of how they affect your body and mind, you'll know which variation is appropriate for you on any given day.

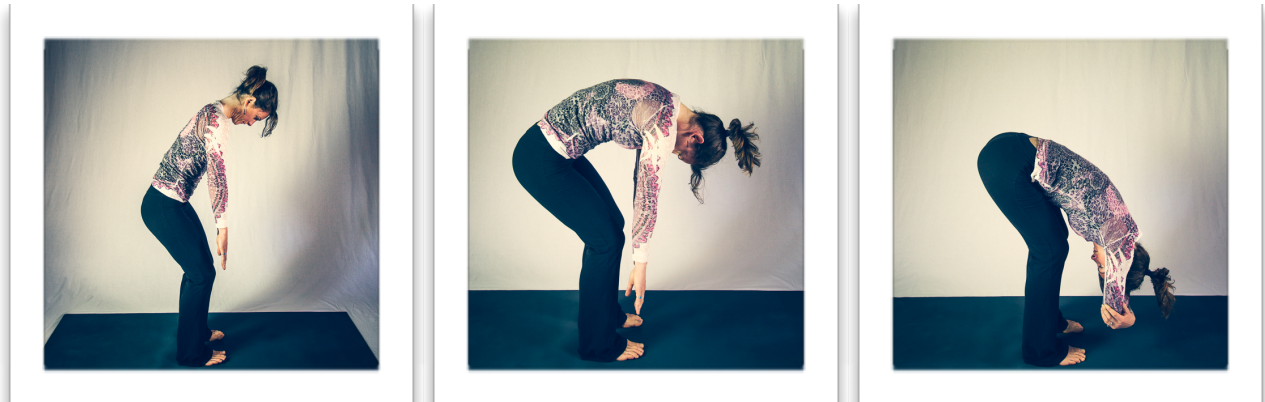
2. Uttanasana Variations (Forward-Bends)

This posture can be intense and it's all about stretching the hamstrings and spine, but it's also soothing for the mind and it can be great for anxiety and depression.



There are many variations of Uttanasana, but allowing the head to hang freely gives the most benefits for the mind. That's exactly what I'm *not* doing in the photos above. See the tension I'm holding in my neck as I strain to keep my spine straight? I'd be better off releasing my chin and letting my head hang freely. That's what we're going to play with below.

Uttanasana Variation #1:



From Tadasana, allow your knees to bend. Hinge forward at your hips, allowing your pelvis to deeply tilt forward over top of your thigh bones.

Rag-doll your torso down over top of your thighs, keeping the entire body soft and floppy.

Release your hands down to the ground and gently free the neck and head by moving your head in small circles, or shaking it forward and back or left to right.

Breathe here, with the belly on the thighs, knees softly bent entire body rag-dolled.

Play with your inhale, feeling it rise up the back of your legs, lengthening your tailbone toward the sky.

Play with the exhale, allowing it to soften and release the torso toward the ground.

Inhale up the back of the legs and exhale down the back of the spine - it's like your breath is doing a circle, starting from the earth, heading toward the sky and then re-joining the earth, going over your body as if it was a mountain.

Uttanasana Variation #2:



From the same position, play with the placement of your arms.

You can walk your hands around to the right side of the body, keeping the hips square and still and lengthening through the left side body.

Walk the hands back to center and over to the other side of the body, lengthening the right side body.

This movement can be done matching the breath - inhale to center, exhale to side of body, inhale back to center, exhale to the other side.

Or you can pause on one side and take three or so breaths there, feeling into the legs and spine.

Be mindful of the neck and head with these movements - do you tense up? Are you still hanging free?

Uttanasana Variation #3:

From the same position, play with the *depth* of the posture.

If your hamstrings, hips and spine are sufficiently open, you may be able to work on straightening your legs while keeping the body loose and long over the thighs.

You can keep the knees bent, and bring your hands around behind the ankles, cupping them with your palms. Actively pull the torso into the

thighs pressing the top parts of the body together and intensifying the stretch in the upper back.

As you inhale, focus on lifting your hips up to the sky while pressing down through your heels.

As you exhale, focus on softening and releasing your torso.

Let the oscillation of the breath carry you deeper and deeper into the posture.



Safely Releasing from Uttanasana:

Only spend as long as is comfortable in this posture. You may wish to take a break and do Child's Pose in between. You may wish to continue with the next posture in this series, and alternate between them, coming back into Uttanasana again.

If you want to stand up straight, take your time. You've had your head below your knees for awhile and it's possible to feel dizzy and lightheaded.

Roll up out of the posture like you rag-dolled down into it.

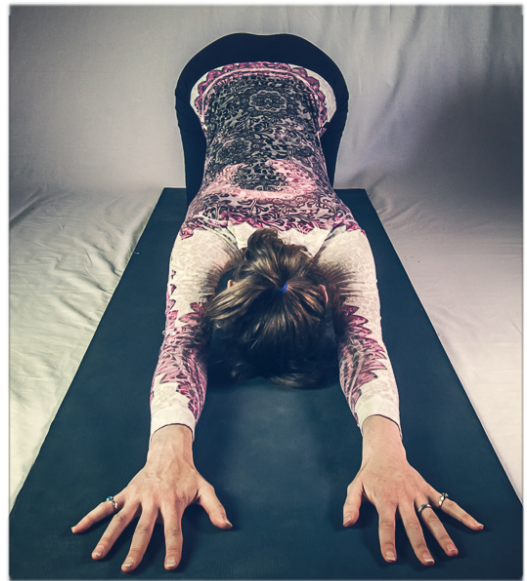
Be mindful of engaging and lifting from the core. Use your hands for support on your knees if you need to.

Take as many breaths as required to come up. Pause in Tadasana and allow your body to settle again.

3. Uttana Shishosana (Half-Downward Dog)

This is one of my most favourite yoga poses, and totally under-rated. It's not an excuse for a full downward dog, but rather, a posture completely in it's own right.

Uttana Shishosana opens our chest up, relieves our spine, and gives our pelvis the freedom to tilt forward without getting caught on hip flexors or tight hamstrings. Plus we can rest our forehead on the ground, or a block.



Uttana Shishosana:

From Uttanasana, place your palms flat on the ground and walk your feet backward, coming down on to your knees.

Make sure your knees are hip-width apart, and that your shins extend straight back from your knees so your feet are also hip-width apart.

Flatten the top of your feet to the ground.

Your palms and knees should be far enough apart that your thighs are perpendicular to the ground and your spine is long and straight.

Your pelvis tilts forward, hinging over top of your thigh bones. Soften through the groin and hip flexors.

Rest your forehead on the ground. If it doesn't reach that far, rest it on a block, cushion or book. Whatever is handy!

Press firmly down into your foundation - through the knees, shins, top of feet and hands. This stops you from sinking into your joints, particularly your shoulder joints.

Over-time, Uttana Shishosana can extend into a backbend.

Uttana Shishosana Exploration #1:

Experiment with pelvis pulsations in this posture to free your spine.

As you inhale, tuck your pelvis under slightly, allowing the back to begin to round and creating more space between your vertebrae.

As you exhale, release the pelvis into a forward tilt again, deepening the backbend. Do three or more breaths like this.

Uttana Shishosana Exploration #2:



Press down strongly through one hand and shift the weight slightly to that same side. Feel the side body lengthen on that side, and the shoulder release.

Inhale and come back to center.

Exhale and press firmly down through the other hand and arm.

Continue to use your breath to alternate between sides, or choose to release deeply on one side before changing over to the other.

The forehead can stay pressed into the ground(or block), or you can turn the head and rest on the same ear as the side you're pressing into. Press into the right side, rest on the right ear.

4. Marjaryasana (Cat's Breath)

This is a great way to release your spine, and feel into any accumulated tension in the pelvis, shoulder area and side bodies.



Marjaryasana:

From Uttana Shishosana, walk your hands back until they are directly underneath your shoulders. Both arms and thighs are perpendicular to the ground.

Spread your fingers wide and actively maintain a sense of pressing down through the hands and the shins & feet.

Take a breath or two in a neutral spine.

On your next exhale, tuck your tailbone under, drop your chin toward your chest and arch your back up like an angry cat. Allow the exhale to fully take you into the position.

On the inhale, extend your tailbone up towards the sky, lift your gaze up, draw your shoulder blades in toward your spine and down toward your tailbone while releasing your ribs and belly to the ground.

Repeat, letting the breath lead you. First the inhale starts, then you move. First the exhale, then the movement.

Tune into your tailbone and let it initiate all the movement, creating a ripple affect up your spine.

Marjaryasana Exploration #1 - Cheek to Cheek:

Come back into a neutral spine and check your foundation.

Take an inhale, and as you exhale curve your body sideways as if you were trying to press your cheek against your hip.

Inhale back to centre. Exhale as you go the other way. Keep the spine on one plane horizontally.

Think of making a C-shape with your body on each side.

Take as many breaths as you need to to free up the side body.



Marjaryasana Exploration #2 - Dancing Cat's Breath:

Start in neutral spine, checking in with your foundation and your breath.

Begin to do circles with your pelvis - as if you had a long tail and were drawing circles with the tip of it.

Let that circle of the pelvis travel up your spine until your shoulders begin to do circles too.

Finally, let your neck naturally join into the circles.

Notice how you're circling through Cat's Breath - sometimes the spine is arched, sometimes the spine is like a bowl.

Circle for as many times as you like.

Come back to neutral spine.

Start the pelvis circles again, this time going in the opposite direction. One way always feels strange and uncoordinated - stay with it.

If you lose your flow, just come back to stillness, feel your foundation, connect to your breath, and then start with the pelvis circles again.

Over time, playing with this variation of Cat's Breath can allow the breath to spontaneously move your body in a way that opens the body up as it's needed.

You can feel the places where you need to slow down and breathe deeply or the places where a faster movement is required.

The movement literally starts to take on a mind of its own - let it! It's also very hard to photograph, so you're just going to have to play with this one!

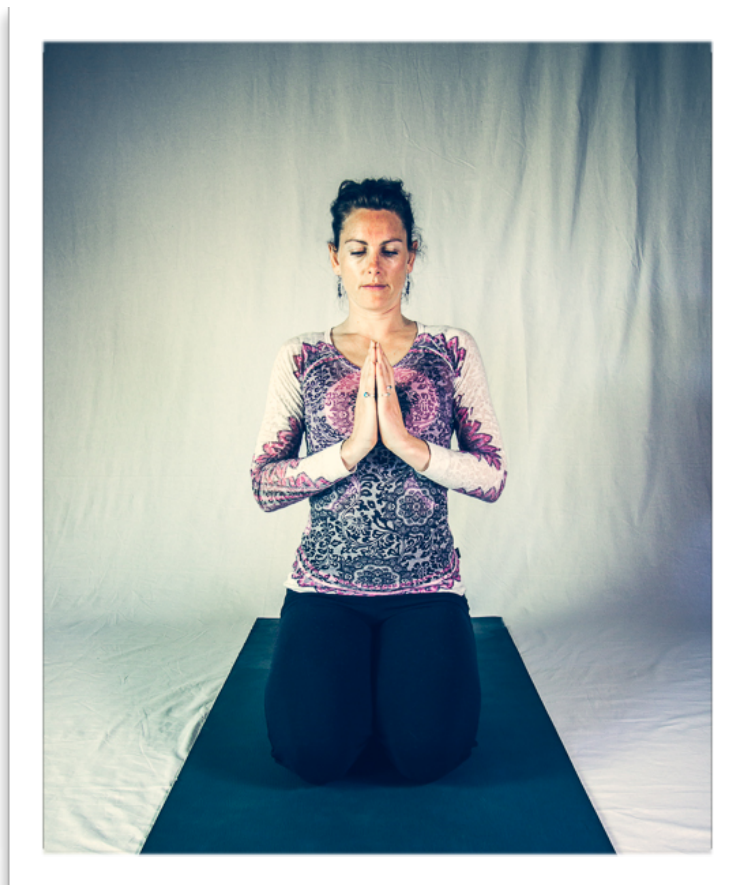
5. Virasana with Anjali Mudra (Heroes Pose)

After all that movement, it's wise to come back to a posture of stillness, and feel into your body, noticing what might have changed since you began your practice.

Sometimes, these postures of stillness, where we're not being asked to do anything that requires great strength or flexibility, can be the most difficult. They seem simple, but that doesn't mean they're easy.

Virasana with Anjali Mudra:

Sit on your heels with your knees together and your feet extended flat back. If this is difficult for either your knees or your ankles, grab a block or a cushion and use that to lift you up high enough to find a position of comfort where you can still feel an opening through your knees or ankles.



The pelvis tilts forward slightly - just enough to create space for the spine to lengthen toward the sky.

The shoulder blades hug the spine and drop down toward the earth, and the collarbones are broad and open.

On an inhale, bring your palms together at your chest in Anjali Mudra. Keep the elbows hugging into the body and the hands slowly lower than your armpits.

Actively press the palms together. Fingers are straight and together. really take time to feel the sensations of your palms pressing together. Notice any changes in your shoulders or chest when you actively press the palms against each other.

Breathe mindfully, keeping awareness in your body - how do your feet feel? Your shins? Your knees? Your thighs? Your pelvis? Your spine? Your shoulders? Your chest? Your belly? Your neck.

Scanning through the body makes it more likely you'll notice areas of tension, and can consciously relax those areas.

Exploration #1 - Circular Breathing:

Take an inhale. As you exhale, send the breath out of your torso, through your shoulder joint and along your right arm into your palms.

As you inhale, pull the breath back from the palms, along the left arm, through the shoulder joint and into the torso.

Repeat, using an exhale along the right arm, and inhale along the left arm, going around and around in a circle.

After you've done ten or so rounds, pause and let your breath come back to normal. Adjust your posture if you need to.

Begin on the other side, exhaling through the left arm and inhaling through the right arm.

Do ten or so rounds on that side.

Keep the palms actively pressed against each other and your awareness firmly inside your body and on your breath.

7. Sukhasana Variations (Easy-Cross Legged)

The beauty of sukhasana is resting the forehead against something - whether it's a chair, bolster, block, fists or the floor. That resting of the head, whilst in a forward bend, is soothing for the mind and allows all stress in the body and mind to dissipate and melt away.

Sukhasana, or Easy Pose, has many variations. The trick, as always, is to work within the limitations of your body and find the place where *you* can surrender into the posture. Use as many props as necessary.



Setting up Sukhasana:

#1: Find your seat

The placement of the pelvis is the most important aspect of setting up this posture well. You want to be able to easily sit with your legs placed in front of you - they're not actually crossed, but parallel to each other.

Your knees need to be at the same height or lower than your hips. For this to happen, the pelvis has to slightly tilt forward, allowing the thighs to release in the hip joints.

If your pelvis doesn't have much movement, and instead is rolling backward, making your spine round and your knees pop up higher than your hips, you need to sit on a block, blanket or stack of books.

You need to sit on something that lifts your hips up, allows you to find that slight forward tilt of the pelvis, therefore releasing the knees lower to the ground.

#2: Lengthen the Spine

Your foundation now forms a three pointed triangle - the tailbone and the two knees as each point of the triangle.

Think of your foundation as releasing into the earth while your spine and torso lengthens towards the sky.

It can help to place your hands on your knees and gently press the knees into the ground - gently! - while drawing your shoulders back and down and lengthening the crown of the head up to the sky. This creates a soft, natural traction through the spine and out of the hip joints.

#3: Begin to Fold Forward

If you're sitting up on some kind of prop, because you have tight hips, you likely won't have any forward motion at all. In this case, it's wise to place a chair in front of you so you can rest your hands or arms on the chair. (See the photo at the start of this section.)

Otherwise, we begin to focus on folding forward. This motion initiates from the very pit of the belly - we're not rounding our spine at all, we're

moving with integrity from our lower belly, drawing up and out to lengthen the front of our body forward. This is crucial.

Don't focus on bending your forehead towards the ground, focus on drawing your lower belly forward towards your heels.



#4: Rest the Forehead

As you find more movement through the forward fold, you want to rest your forehead against something. This is very soothing for the mind. It helps us to feel supported, as if we can fully surrender into the posture.

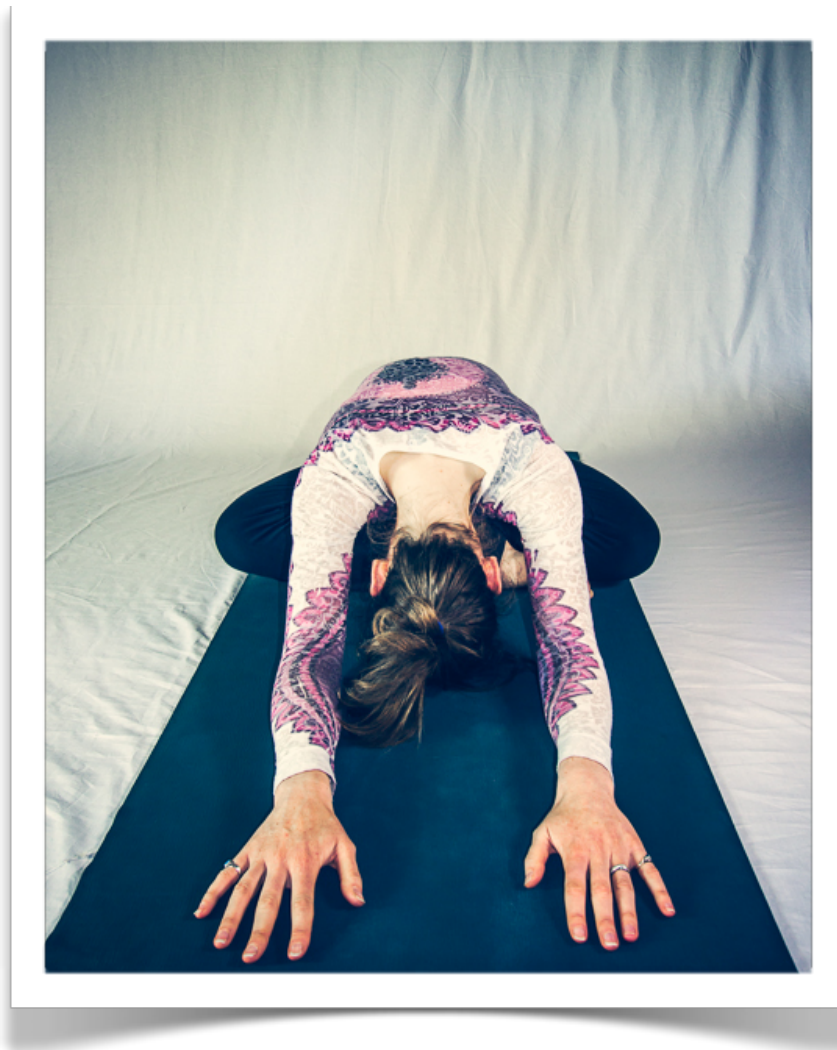
If you don't have much forward movement, you'll need a prop to rest on - a chair for example, or a bolster. Experiment with finding something that's the right height for you.

If you've got more forward movement, you may be able to stack two fists on top of each other and rest on the top of that. Over time, you can begin to flatten your hands out - first one fist and one flat hand, then two flat hands, and finally your forehead reaches the floor.

Once you get all the way into this position, stay for at least five breaths - but preferably, stay for five minutes or so.

It is challenging! The legs can burn. The pelvis can feel cramped. The mind can get jittery.

Keep your focus on your breath, and inhale into any tight or restricted sensations you can feel. Exhale through any tensions, melting it all away into the earth.



#5: Coming out of Sukhasana Forward Fold

When you're ready to come out of the pose, you can inhale to start, and take your time. Maybe take three or four breaths to come all the way to upright.

#6: Do the same again, but on the other side.

Change over which leg is in front, and begin the same process again. Take your time. No rush. Get the foundation right, connect to your breath, and then move with integrity from the pit of the belly.

Don't expect the second side to be the same - we're always different on each side. Enjoy!

8. Relax in Savasana (Corpse Pose)

You've done it! And hopefully the mind is already feeling far more still. Depending on how you approached the postures, and which variations and explorations you did, this practice may have taken you anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour.

You're almost done - savasana and then the option of Alternate Nostril Breathing.

Setting up Savasana:



Lie back and observe everything that's going on with a soft awareness.

Keep your awareness firmly in your body - every time you notice that you're 'thinking', see the thought, let it go, and drop back down into the space between the thoughts.

That might only last one or two seconds before the next thought arises - and that's ok. Just do the same process. See the thought, release the thought, re-focus your awareness on the space between the thoughts.

What matters in savasana is not that we don't think, but our relationship to our thinking. Focus on observation, release, and re-focus on the gaps between the thoughts. In time, sitting in the gap will become the natural place for us.

Think of a glass of fizzy water when it's first poured out of a bottle - all those thousands of bubbles rising towards the surface. Those bubbles are like the thoughts of our mind before we start practicing yoga.

Now think of a glass of fizzy water that's been sitting on the bench for a few hours. There's only one or two bubbles left and they rise very slowly. mostly, the glass is still water. That's the quality of our mind when we've been practicing yoga for a number of years.

Your thoughts are just bubbles - see them, let them go, settle back into the clearness of the water.

Take longer in this second Corpse pose - 2 to 5 minutes at least, preferably ten minutes if you can.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

This is an excellent pranayama technique for daily practice. The Sanskrit name for this technique is Nadi Shodhana Pranayama - translated it means nadi = subtle energy channel, shodhana = cleaning, purification; pranayama = breathing technique.



As with any pranayama technique, it's important to never strain or make conscious effort. Keep the breath smooth and at ease. Choose a count that feels natural and easy for you too - you should never feel like you're gasping for breath, or running out of air.

Initially, start with just five rounds. Once you feel comfortable with the technique, increase to nine rounds. This is sufficient to feel full benefits of the pranayama. Over time, you may wish to do longer, increasing by multiple of nines.

Alternate Nostril Breathing: The Benefits

These are the commonly described benefits of Alternate Nostril Breathing . It's also how I feel after practicing on a regular basis!

Calms and centers the mind, helping to keep you in the present.

Releases stress and tension in the mind and body.

Harmonizes the right and left sides of the body and brain, making one feel more centered, because you're making sure that you're breathing evenly through both nostrils.

Helps regulate the warming/cooling systems in the body.

Alternate Nostril Breathing: The Practice

Start with five rounds, and increase to nine rounds as you feel more comfortable with the practice.

Take a comfortable seated position, such as kneeling on your heels or sitting in easy cross-legged. If you need a block or cushion underneath you to lift up your pelvis and allow it to tilt forward slightly, make sure you sit on one. If you're cross-legged, your knees should be the same height or lower than your hips. If they're not, a block or cushion is key.

Release your sitting bones to the earth and lengthen your tailbone toward the wall behind you. Feel yourself connect to the earth beneath you.

Extend the crown of the head towards to the sky, and gently bring your chin in slightly - this aligns the spine with the back of the neck.

Rest your hands in a comfortable position and close your eyes.

Allow your belly to relax.

Using your right hand, bring it up toward your face and rest your index and long finger on your forehead lightly. There shouldn't be much pressure on the forehead, this is just to give the hand something to rest against while you're using it to close first one and then the other nostril.

The ring finger will close the left nostril, and the thumb the right nostril. Again, you don't need much pressure to close the nostril, just enough so you naturally breathe through the other nostril. In time, just a slight pressure on the nostril will be enough to switch the breathing to the other nostril.

Exhale all of the air out of your lungs and gently close the right nostril with the thumb. Inhale for a count of three through the left nostril.

Open the right nostril and gently close the left nostril with the ring finger. Exhale for a count of three through the right nostril.

Inhale back through the right nostril for a count of three.

Switch fingers again and exhale through the left nostril for a count of three.

This is one round - think of it as climbing up the mountain (inhaling through the left) down the mountain (exhaling through the right), and then coming back home again (inhaling through the right and exhaling through the left).

Use the other hand to keep count - have it face down on your knee and press one finger at a time into the knee until you've done five rounds.

After you've finished, keep your eyes closed and both hands on the knees and just observe the effects of the pranayama. Take at least 2 minutes in meditation - longer if you can.

And that is it - a short, simple yet intensely powerful yoga practice that you can use to still an anxious, hyper-active mind.

The challenge lies not in fancy postures, but in staying present to your unfolding experience in each moment.

The postures and pranayama are designed to work with all aspects of the body - physical, mental, emotional and energetic .

This series can also provide a good base for a daily home practice. It's enough to warm up the body and still the mind - and that's yoga!

Enjoy your practice!

Many Blessings, Kara-Leah