

# LIFELONG YOGA

Maximizing Your Balance, Flexibility, and Core Strength  
in Your 50s, 60s, and Beyond

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**SAGE ROUNTREE AND ALEXANDRA DESIATO**

FOREWORD BY ROY WILLIAMS



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# Lifelong Yoga

*Maximizing Your Balance, Flexibility, and  
Core Strength in Your 50s, 60s, and Beyond*

Sage Rountree and Alexandra DeSiato



North Atlantic Books  
Berkeley, California

## **Additional praise for *Lifelong Yoga***

*“I’ve been an athlete for forty-two years. Since turning fifty, I feel my limiters are lack of ability to recover, joint stiffness, impaired range of movement, chronic repetitive injury, and fatigue. Yoga is the answer for me now more than ever! Sage’s gentle but specific approach points me in the direction of improving all of these challenges. But most importantly, she has shown me how to relax, something highly competitive athletes have difficulty truly achieving.”*

—KRISTIN VILLOPOTO, 2016 USAT ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

*“Part Two of Lifelong Yoga, Solving Problems with Yoga, is especially helpful for me as I’m always looking for ways to proactively address the tweaks and twinges that come with intense training by improving balance, core strength, and stability, especially now that age fifty is just around the corner. In doing so I’ve been able to continue to swim, bike, and run at a high level, but also feel good in my daily life activities, especially the ones that require lifting, bending, and balance. Thanks to Sage and Alexandra for another great resource for athletes and nonathletes alike.”*

—JOANNA YOUNTS, FOUNDER OF KIDS TRI NC AND TWO-TIME FINISHER OF THE IRONMAN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

*“I’ve worked with Sage and Alexandra many years now and seen their work with other folks firsthand. They have a great way of applying their years of combined experience to help people bring out the best in themselves. You will not only be able to work harder, you will work smarter and more safely as well.”*

—DONNIE BARNES, LEADVILLE TRAIL 100 MOUNTAIN BIKE RACE FINISHER

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# **Dedication**

*To partnership, which more than halves the load and more than doubles the fun.*



# Preface

More and more aging athletes, baby boomers, parents, and grandparents are flocking to yoga as support for their changing bodies and as a complement to their already active lifestyles. By recent estimates, at least fourteen million adults fifty and older practice yoga—and that number is only growing. If you've been curious about yoga but considered it to be the purview of the young, rest assured that's simply not true anymore. Yoga is most definitely for everyone, and the gifts of yoga are especially plentiful as we enter later years in life. That's probably why you picked this book up: you've either heard that yoga is a good tool for aging, or you've already done enough yoga to have experienced the benefits firsthand.

Our approach to yoga is to see it as a complement to the lifestyle we hope to continue as we age. We both run, hike, and enjoy the outdoors. We like to move our bodies dancing, in the gym, on the trails, and with our children. If you're active in your midlife and you're hoping to continue healthy movement, competitive sports, or exercise as you age, this is the perfect book for you. With the right approach, yoga is an important tool—maybe even the *most* important tool—for healthy aging and a long life.

And *right approach* is key. That's what we aim to offer here. In the last twenty years there's been a massive shift in the styles of yoga available—and for each of us, a smaller-scale shift in our own bodies' ability to handle these styles. As American yoga moved out of community centers and into gyms and fitness-oriented, often heated, yoga studios, its pace and physical intensity have ramped up considerably. Many young people come to yoga for a workout. This is a fine entry point, but it isn't the only approach, nor is it the best one for not-so-young people. The right yoga for us in midlife and beyond is slower, personalized, and focuses on more than simply the physical.

As we say in our Yoga for Athletes and Yoga for Healthy Aging classes, what we offer is not athletic yoga, nor is it gentle yoga for the very old. It's realistic yoga that fosters balance within the body, balance of the body in space, and balance between body, breath, and mind. While we envision the yoga we offer here as a complement to an active life, you do not have to be

an athlete to benefit from *Lifelong Yoga*. Nor do you need to be in any particular shape. You don't even have to be over forty! You simply need a desire to find better balance and connection, compassion, and an open mind toward the changes that will occur in your body over time.

In our collective three decades of practicing yoga, we've undergone great physical change: pregnancies and deliveries; training for and running marathons, ultramarathons, and long-course triathlons; long-distance backpacking; managing athletic injuries; and a collective three decades of aging! The contortionist poses and glamorous inversions that may appeal to millennial yogis don't interest us. We know fancy shapes aren't always appropriate for supporting our goals of maintaining core strength and balance to complement the other ways we'd like to use our bodies through the years. That's why what we present in *Lifelong Yoga* is different, unique, and immediately helpful for you. It meets you where you are, offers tools for use today, and helps you see how yoga can be a supportive, lifelong practice, inclusive of all circumstances.

# Acknowledgments

Although we are both aging and readily admit it, we have been fortunate enough to work with students a few years further along the path than we are. Students like these are the greatest teachers. *Lifelong Yoga* came into being because our aging students ask smart questions and challenge us to find creative sequences that make them feel better. Much of our approach in this text was inspired by their dedication, presence, and humor. Special thanks go to Donnie Barnes, the very model of dedication, presence, and humor. We are grateful.

Victor, Patricia, and Wes—the beautiful models for this book—are as friendly and graceful as their pictures suggest. We had great fun on our photo shoot with Tammy Lamoureux. Thank you for your assistance and time with this project, all. Your energy shines on the pages.

Without the talent of our agent Linda Konner, our editor Erin Wiegand, and everyone at North Atlantic Books, including Nina Pick and Jessica Sevey, this book wouldn't be here. Thank you.

A special thank you to my most regular students: Roy and Wanda Williams and Judi Seagroves. You are shining examples of how yoga is a lifelong practice, and it's a privilege to have your presence on the mat in every circumstance, win or lose.

Thank you to the students in my Teaching Yoga to Athletes intensives, both for reminding me of my love for this subject matter and for your enthusiasm in discussing yoga for aging athletes. Thanks to my business partner Lies Sapp, co-creator of so many wonderful spaces for balance and connection.

Thank you to my parents. It was my mother, Cindy, who first suggested my next book should be on yoga for older athletes and that I should write it together with Alexandra—she's quite wise. And while my father, Billy, will probably never strike a single yoga pose, he's been a great teacher of profound lessons that are also pointed to in yoga philosophy. Dad's ability to relax (okay, to nap) in any situation should inspire every yogi.

Thank you to Alexandra. Your passion for this project and your skill as a teacher inspire me. You've made this project an especially easy and fun one, and I look forward to more collaboration in the future. Partnership halves the work and triples the fun!

The most important partner in my life is my husband, Wes. It was a special treat to see him hard at work as a model for this book. My biggest gratitude goes to him for his humor, support, and co-parenting of our daughters.

—Sage

My baby-boomer parents, Suzanne and Eugene, have gamely embraced yoga as my enthusiasm has grown. They ask me what to do when they have tight places, and they attend my classes when they visit. My dad says that yoga makes him feel “soft,” which makes my heart sing. They were the audience I had in mind as I wrote.

I have taught for a decade at Alamance Community College, teaching writing, literature, and yoga. Working for and with good people to serve committed students is incredibly rewarding, and organizing a class has a lot in common with writing a book. My experience as a college instructor made this endeavor possible, and I’m very grateful to my colleagues (most especially Courtney Doi, Susan Dalton, and Jennifer Rudd) and my department chair (Anne Helms) for their encouragement.

Many fine teachers have guided me along the path of yoga: thanks especially to Carson Efird, Lies Sapp, Mira Shani, and Sage. My gratitude to Sage is boundless. She has been a fierce, kind, and present teacher and mentor, offering clear feedback and opportunity. She consistently makes me laugh, helps me see broad truths, or enlightens me with her wit and compassion. I have learned a lot from her, much through emulation. Our friendship brings me great joy.

Finally, thanks to my husband, Alex, whose support and love are the foundation for everything else. And thank you for taking on evenings of solo parenting and dinner making, which gifted me the time and space to teach, practice, and write.

—Alexandra

# Foreword

During a game in 2011, an opposing player came diving into our bench, chasing a ball going out of bounds. I could not get out of his way fast enough and took a hit when his shoulder met the outside of my knee. I thought to myself, “Uh-oh. Knee surgery, here I come.” But to my surprise, other than a little soreness the next day, the collision never bothered me. To this day, I attribute my escape from injury to Sage Rountree and her yoga.

My only previous yoga experience left me cold, when I was told to inhale blue air and exhale red air. Mumbo jumbo I can do without. When my wife and I were introduced to Sage in 2010, I realized this yoga was different and could improve my flexibility, something that was never emphasized to athletes back in my day.

But the benefits have been more than I expected. Yoga has eased my stiff body from thousands of hours of air travel and helped me relax after the intensity of close games. And when the stress keeps me awake at night, I practice breathing techniques learned with yoga. When Sage asks for requests before each class, I just say, “Make me feel better,” and yoga always does.

*Lifelong Yoga* can do that for you. Sage and Alexandra DeSiato offer a friendly introduction to yoga. You will improve your flexibility and your balance. You will learn breathing and relaxation techniques. And you will understand that yoga is not for sissies when you find yourself sweating and trembling with some of the pose sequences. Practice Lifelong Yoga and feel better, whether you’re playing golf or playing with the grandkids.

Roy Williams, University of North Carolina men’s basketball coach and three-time national champion, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2016

# **PART I: OVERVIEW**

# Chapter 1: How Yoga Helps

The word *yoga* encompasses many different approaches to movement, stretching, mindfulness, and relaxation, from power yoga to restorative yoga to laughter yoga. Even if you've done yoga for years, knowing which poses, sequences, and aspects are key for aging with vitality can be challenging. And if you're brand new to yoga, you may not know where to begin!

Yoga confers strength and flexibility, both physically and mentally. Yoga can help us find balance, both physically and mentally. Yoga involves physical awareness; mental awareness, often called mindfulness; and breath awareness—all powerful tools for adapting to the changes of aging and for managing those changes. In this chapter, we'll look at these aspects of yoga and explain what's most crucial if you plan to use your body safely and continue to be active as you age. So now we begin the study of yoga, aging, and the intersection of the two.

## ***Atha Yoganusasanam***

At the start of the Yoga Sutras, one of the oldest texts on yoga, we're given this Sanskrit sutra, or bit of wisdom: *atha yoganusasanam*, which means approximately "Now we begin our study and instruction of yoga." We love the importance of the first word: now. Stay in the present and you'll be ready to learn yoga. Now is always the right time to start—and it doesn't matter where you're starting from.

## **Yoga and Strength**

Yoga builds mental and physical strength. Continuing to move as you age keeps your body strong. Yoga offers enough challenge through body-weight exercises that you can count on it to keep you strong, but it's adaptable and flexible, so you can alter your practice to fit your body as you continue to



change with age. But yoga isn't good only for your body: research shows that a meditation practice keeps your brain stronger and sharper as the years pass, potentially protecting you from Alzheimer's and dementia.<sup>1</sup> This strength of mind is critical to quality of life.

A dedicated yoga practice builds healthier bones by offering weight-bearing movements, builds muscle mass by continually adding stress to muscular tissue, and builds confidence in movement—that last part comes from repeated practice, and it matters a lot. The more confident you are as you move in your body, the less likely you are to fall or get injured.

This brings us to a question we hear often: what muscles are most important to build in later years? It's hard to make a case that there are only certain muscles that are important to build. If we had to narrow our focus to certain muscle groups, we would suggest that a focus on core strength, hip strength, and shoulder strength matters most. It's important that you remain strong in these key areas, as your core and glutes (your seat and rear hip muscles) are crucial for moving from sitting to standing, and healthy shoulders correlate with strong posture. Being able to stand up and stand tall without assistance or help translates into a long life of independent living. Despite what you may have heard, you can build muscle tissue at any age. While your muscular growth will slow down as you age, strength training and weight bearing, as in yoga, produce results. And having good quantity and quality of muscle tissue as you get older will have a bearing on energy levels, overall health, and vitality.

A dedicated yoga practice builds those muscles, and it also builds discipline and perseverance—components important for both body and mind. Every time you practice, you reinforce a healthy habit of movement, breathing, and time to yourself free of electronic gadgets and other distractions. This discipline of practice creates a very specific type of mental strength.

## ***Tapas***

In yoga philosophy, *tapas* is one of the *niyamas*, the principles of personal observance. Translated from Sanskrit, *tapas* means something like “fiery devotion,” “burning discipline,” or “zeal.” Every time you make good on your yoga commitment by doing a practice, you are cultivating *tapas*.

## **Yoga and Flexibility**

When most people think of yoga, they connect it to physical flexibility. Yoga does help you move more easily! One of yoga’s primary benefits is that it helps you to maintain elasticity in your soft tissues: your muscles, the fascia that wraps around them, and tendons. It also keeps your joints well lubricated. A regular yoga practice helps ward off the muscular and fascial tightness that comes with aging. This brings us to another common question: how much flexibility do you need? You need to be loose enough to move through your daily activities, doing things like stretching to get a box of cereal off the shelf, reaching for a bag in the backseat of your car, and bending down to tie your shoes. You don’t have to put your foot behind your head, and although that would make an impressive picture, that level of flexibility isn’t necessary for good health. In fact, it may be indicative of destabilization through the joints.

A dedicated yoga practice doesn’t just give us physical flexibility: yoga moves us away from black-and-white thinking to build mental flexibility. It may seem astounding that a little stretching and breathing can offer something so significant, but yoga is moving meditation. As you move in your body, you get to observe your mind—without acting, speaking, or doing anything about what you observe. Meditation confers cognitive flexibility—the ability to see things from multiple perspectives and break from habitual thinking.

We tend to get quite set in our ways as we age, preferring to make the same choices we’ve always made, from the small (when to get up, what to eat for breakfast, which route to drive to work) to the large (political affiliation, religious affiliation, worldview). A regular yoga practice can help you see

these choices and decide whether to continue with them or to alter them. By opening your eyes to other ways of being, yoga develops kindness and compassion for yourself and others.

## ***Samskara and Changing Patterns***

*Samskara* is the Sanskrit word for the habitual patterns we all fall into. Yoga gives us an opportunity to observe these habits and to determine whether they still work. In this way, yoga helps us discern between a groove—a helpful habit whose regularity improves our health—and a rut.

## **Balance as Key**

When you begin a yoga practice or when your yoga practice begins to change with age, the most important word is *balance*. Balance is the key to staying healthy and warding off injury. It's the key to mental equanimity and a flexible approach to what life might throw at you. Balanced is how you want your body to feel: not too taxed and not too relaxed. When you find the right balance between strength and flexibility, you'll find ease.

### **BALANCE IN SPACE**

Awareness and control of where your body is in space are critical for keeping you safe and healthy through the years. The ability to stand unassisted on your own two legs—or better yet, on one—can mean the difference between independent living and needing care.

Your ability to balance in space depends on several different systems: your sense of sight, the vestibular system in the inner ear, your sense of feeling into your feet. Of course, age can affect all of these, imposing challenge on your ability to balance. Happily, regular practice will improve your control of the systems that do work well so that you can avoid falls through the years. See Chapter Four for more on balance in space.

## BALANCE WITHIN THE BODY

A body that's been living on the planet for several decades has several decades' worth of habits. Leaning to one side while you sit on the sofa, carrying children, driving, pointing and clicking on the computer, and playing sports like golf or tennis all contribute to asymmetries in your body. When these imbalances grow pronounced they can contribute to injuries. Yoga poses offer you both the opportunity to notice these imbalances and the means to correct them. These asymmetries occur in each of the three planes in which your body can move: forward and back, rotation around the central axis, and left to right.

### Front to Back

The balance between strength and flexibility in the front and back of your body is critical to your ability to keep your chest open—and therefore to your posture and to your ability to breathe well. If you spend much of your day sitting down, you're probably tight along the front of the chest and hips and overstretched across your back. Passive backbends like supported fish and supported bridge will help alleviate this tightness in the front. Once that's open, you can strengthen your back in active backbends like locust pose and core exercises like plank. In addition, working to build strength in your glutes with the sequences outlined in Part Three will help balance your body front to back.

### Top to Bottom

Your legs are naturally stronger than your arms—they have to be, to bear your weight and to move you through space. Every time you stand up, sit down, and move around, you're working to maintain strength in your lower body. But your upper body doesn't get the same challenge unless you seek it out. This is why a strength-training routine is so important. Working with weights and doing other forms of resistance training is critical to maintaining strength in both your upper and your lower body. The poses and routines outlined in Parts Two and Three use body weight to add resistance and to build and maintain upper-body strength. For example, push-ups, while frustrating at first, are an efficient way to work most of your upper-body muscles. Being strong in the push-up position will also help you catch yourself should you fall.

## Left to Right

Just as you are right- or left-handed, in most movements you favor one side over the other. This means you'll notice some imbalance on each side between your arms and legs, and possibly even through your core. Often one side is the strong side, while the other has more flexibility and dexterity. Consider the combination of strength and flexibility required when you plant one foot to kick a soccer ball with your other foot.

These differences can feel quite pronounced as you are doing yoga poses. To build balance from side to side, make a point of working your weaker side to the point of fatigue. This should feel like you hold a pose or repeat a movement only to the point where you could do one to three more breaths or repetitions with good form.

Part of the beauty of doing yoga at home is the opportunity to hold things so that they feel “just right” for you. This could mean you spend much more time on one side than the other. If you're trying to correct a strength imbalance, say between your left leg and your right, you can start and finish with your weaker side, so that you might complete two sets on that side and only one on your strong side.

## BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND REST

Through life you constantly negotiate between challenging your body's endurance abilities and giving your body recovery time. So, too, you challenge your mind to work hard—first in school, and then at work—and you also take restorative time by vacationing and de-stressing. This cycle plays out annually, and these periods of activity and dormancy often mirror the seasons. In the warmer months you probably do more. In the colder months you might hunker down and reserve your energy. As you age, this negotiation continues, only you get to see seasons in a broader sense. Now you've entered the Indian summer of your life. You're rightfully slowing down. You're considering what you'll need in order to make it safely through the winter. You might be moving toward the end of your career; you might be entering retirement. But at this stage, if you're not looking closely at the relationship between activity and rest and investigating how that works in your life, you should. Yoga can help you do this.

## ***Asana***

*Asana* is the Sanskrit word for “seat,” and we apply it more generally to the poses that we do in yoga class. A reference to “the asana practice” simply means the physical practice of yoga poses. The poses are one way to build the body-mind connection that yoga offers, but not the only way! Breath awareness, breath exercises, and meditation are different complementary pathways to connection.

## **Breath**

In yoga, *pranayama* is the Sanskrit term for breath work or breath control. There are many different ways you can breathe. Instead of listing the types of pranayama, we want to give you general practical information about how to use your breath as you move and as you rest.

The first step is to get to know your breath. To grow more aware of your breath, ask yourself questions like these:

Where does my breath enter my body?

What is its temperature on entry? On exit?

Where is my breath moving in my body?

Is that movement sequential, with something moving first, and something next, and something after that, or are many things happening simultaneously?

What sound does my breath make?

Can I feel my breath moving in many dimensions: forward and back, left and right, up and down?

How long does it take to breathe in? How long does it take to breathe out?

**BREATH TO SUPPORT MOVEMENT**

Your breath fuels your movement. In Part Two you'll find some cues to use your inhalations and exhalations to ease movement into and out of yoga poses.

In your workouts and daily life, use exhalations on exertion to give you some extra *oomph* when you are pushing, lifting, or swinging. Exhalations help you engage through your core, especially your abdominal and pelvic floor muscles. These muscles help support your spine and pelvis so you can more effectively send power against the ground, weight, racket, or club.

If you get a side stitch, reset your breathing pattern by varying which foot steps down or hits the ground at the start of the inhalation and exhalation. That is, change from right to left, or left to right. This repositions your diaphragm on impact and can alleviate the stitch.

Use your breath to gauge exertion. During easy warm-up and cool-down periods in your workouts, and throughout your yoga practice, nasal breathing should be comfortable, some stuffiness notwithstanding. While engaged in harder workouts, it may not be feasible to breathe exclusively through your nose. Whatever your effort, look for a regular rhythm that helps you feel controlled and steady. And listen to your body—literally. If your breath is loud or wheezy, ease up.

## BREATH TO SUPPORT RELAXATION

While respiration is largely automatic and unconscious, it can also become a voluntary function. You can choose the appropriate breath to utilize when you're faced with stress or in need of relaxation. You know already that changing your breath can help you remain calm and can encourage emotional equanimity. When you've seen a friend or family member upset, you've probably said to them, "Just breathe" or "Take a few deep breaths." This intuitive sense that breath is the key to feeling calmer and eliminating anxiety is correct. How you breathe affects your mood, heart rate, sleep, and energy levels.

### Sighing

Have you ever noticed that when you're feeling especially content at the end of a long day, settling into your favorite chair, or enjoying your first sip of tea, you tend to sigh? Research shows a clear link between sighing and

feeling calm. Sighing can be either automatic or voluntary. Automatic sighing occurs regularly every few minutes and provides a specific function: these deep breaths help open your lungs and sustain healthy lung function. We can voluntarily sigh, too, of course, and we often do when we're feeling content or sad. Sighing has emotional correlations: you do it during times of distress or relief. Research shows you sigh *more* often when you're feeling relieved, relaxed, and calm.<sup>2</sup> We don't know which begets which: does sighing make you calmer, or does feeling calm make you sigh? But it's reasonable to explore the relationship between the two. When you feel stressed, overwhelmed, in need of a reset, or a little tense, try a few open-mouthed sighs. We often use this at the start or end of a yoga class to help students transition to a more relaxed state.

### Three-Part Breath

Three-part breath involves slowing your breath down and watching each "part" of it. In Sanskrit this type of pranayama is called *dirgha swasam*. To practice three-part breath, you breathe sequentially into three regions of your lungs. As you inhale, feel your breath move into your lower lungs, rib cage, and upper chest. As you exhale, feel this happen in reverse: notice your breath leave your body as it moves out of your upper chest, rib cage, and then your lower lungs (which may register in your belly). Three-part breath is calming and grounding; when you focus on your breath, you have a clear anchor for your attention.

### Breath Ratios

Once you've tuned in to your breath moving in space using the three-part breath exercise, notice how your breath moves across time. Using a rhythm that feels comfortable, take a slow count as your breath comes in and goes out. This could feel like *inhale-two-three-four, exhale-two-three-four*, or count to whatever number makes sense. Make the inhalation and exhalation even.

Either continue with an even count or begin to play with the transitions. Notice the shift from inhalation to exhalation, and notice the shift at the other end of the breath where exhalation yields to inhalation. The breath moves through these liminal states like a wave on the shore—it comes in, it seems to suspend for a brief moment, and it slides out. At the far end of the breath



there's another short pause before the next wave of breath laps in. If it feels good, take this pause like a rest beat in music at both ends of the breath count. This could feel like *inhale-two-three-four, pause, exhale-two-three-four, pause*.

This counting should be soothing and calming. If it makes you feel confused or frantic, stop! Try again another time using a count that works for you, so you can build a habit of relaxation, not stress.

If everything is going well, you can extend your exhalation count by a few. This could feel like *inhale-two-three-four, pause, exhale-two-three-four-five-six, pause*. It usually takes several rounds to get the timing right, since the inhalation is now shorter than the exhalation. Once you settle in to this ratio, complete five to fifteen rounds, then come back to your normal breath. Notice how you feel. A relaxed, extended breath with emphasis on the exhalation encourages the parasympathetic nervous system—the relaxation response—to engage.

## **Mindfulness and Meditation**

As you age, being “in the now” and experiencing mindfulness may come easier; patience and calm are virtues of aging, and they come from the wisdom of broad experience. Aging's natural move toward stillness will allow you to notice the present, bring your attention back to it when your mind wanders, and remain in the moment. When you do that, you're experiencing mindfulness meditation. Cultivating mindfulness makes accepting the changes of aging into a sweet practice. If you're living fully in the present, you have little time to compare present you with past you. And this isn't just empty talk: practicing meditation has been proven to change your brain. Studies have shown that meditation changes the brain in the areas associated with empathy, stress, memory, and attention span.<sup>3</sup> When you practice meditation, you increase your capacity for compassion (including self-compassion), and you stimulate your brain, keeping it healthy.

### **FOCUS**

The first step toward mindfulness is building your ability to focus. In yoga we would call this *dharana*, single-pointed concentration. You bring your attention to one item and work to keep it there over time. This item could be

an image or a candle flame, a word or phrase, or simply the breath. Here are three approaches.

## Gaze

What you are looking at affects where your mind goes—and sometimes where your body goes, as in the case of riding your bike. Instead of letting your gaze flit around, rest it on a single thing.

In your yoga practice that might mean setting your gaze on the corner of a brick on the studio wall, toward the front of your mat, or on a spot on the ceiling. Of course, this depends on your orientation in space and what it is you are practicing. For standing balance poses, rest your gaze toward the ground for more stability, at eye level for more challenge. (For a very big challenge, blink your eyes closed, and you will have to use other senses to focus.)

In a sitting meditation practice, try not to close your eyes, lest you fall asleep. Instead, have a very soft gaze toward the floor, or choose an object to look at. This could be a pretty rock, a feather, or simply a thread in the carpet. Maintain your attention on this spot; if your eyes start to roam, refocus.

## Mantra

A mantra is a word or phrase that you repeat over and over. It can have special import, but its real power lies in the repetition. This repetition is the tool that helps develop your focus. Your attention will naturally wander from the mantra; keep bringing it back. The following simple mantras can be used during meditation, yoga practice, or any rhythmic movement like walking, swimming, cycling, or running.

*I am here now*, or simply *here now*. Inhale on *I am* or *here*; exhale on *here now* or *now*.

*Yes, thanks*. This phrase from Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh encourages both acceptance of the present moment and gratitude for it. Start by practicing it in happy circumstances and it will become easier to deploy no matter what is happening.

*In, out.* Watching and labeling your breath helps build both focus and the mind-body connection.

*Peace, peace.*

*Let go.*

## Simple Project

Further sharpen your focus by setting yourself a simple project of focusing on your breath. Return to your breath every time your attention wanders—and it will! This return is the strengthening work, like lifting and lowering a weight.

Breath awareness is a simple project you can work on. So is counting your breaths. This sounds far easier than it is: most of us are distracted before we get to ten. When you find you've lost count, just go back to one and start over. The real work is in the noticing and the return.

To count your breaths, take the *in, out* mantra and add a count. You can count *one* on the inhalations and *one* on the exhalations, or *one* on the inhalations and *two* on the exhalations. This could feel like *In, one; out, one. In, two; out, two.* Or it could be *In, one; out, two.* Exactly what you do isn't important; the work is in coming back every time your awareness wanders.

Counting beats within the breath, as described under “Breath ratios” on pages 10–11, is another good tool for focus. When you are moving, the count can match your footsteps or arm strokes: “*In, two, three, four, out, two, three, four.*” Counting in this manner can also help sharpen your focus as you sit or lie in stillness.

## PRESENCE

Once you've built focus, or your ability to sustain attention on one thing at a time, you can layer on presence, your ability to hold awareness of many things simultaneously. Instead of *either/or*, this puts you in a *both/and* mindset. You become aware of the movement of your breath *and* the wandering of your mind and its return to the present; or the object of your gaze *and* your body in space.



*Figure 1-1. Seated meditation*

## **SPONTANEOUS LESSONS COME FROM PRACTICE**

The ability to focus and be present emerges naturally from doing yoga poses with attention. Setting your gaze for a balance pose builds focus. Feeling where your body is in space builds presence. Counting five breaths while in a pose builds focus. Feeling how those breaths move in your body builds presence. Realizing and remembering that your needs vary from those of other students in the same class—or even from your own needs a day, week, month, or year ago—builds equanimity.

## **LEARNING MEDITATION**

Yoga poses are designed to prepare us for the inward connection that comes from practicing meditation. While we develop focus and presence through an asana practice, regular meditation will hone these further. It's as simple as using the focus exercises described above.

Find a position you can hold comfortably, either seated (try a chair, or elevate your hips on a prop, as in [Figure 1-1](#)), reclining, or standing. Another option is to walk slowly. Determine a time limit for your meditation. We suggest you start with five minutes and, after a week or two, try ten, then fifteen, then twenty or more minutes. A timer is useful here!

Be clear about your project—repeat a mantra or count your breaths. Every time you find yourself off task, gently return to your project. You'll quickly notice how difficult it is to stay on task! Each time you notice, you're developing mindfulness, and every time you come back to the project at hand, you're strengthening your focus. This is the real work of meditation: continually coming back to the present, with self-compassion (don't beat yourself up!), patience, and attention.

## Chapter 2: Age-Related Changes

Along with the smile lines and gray hair, aging brings changes that are harder to see but very easy to feel, especially during movement. As you age, you'll encounter general physiological changes in elasticity, stability, speed, strength, and endurance, as well as a different perspective on physical goals. Specific health problems emerge as you age, and these age-related illnesses might affect your yoga practice. In this chapter we offer our thoughts on how to modify your practice for these common ailments, and we detail the ways that (in some cases) yoga can actually relieve symptoms or has been shown to improve medical outcomes. From heart issues to less lung capacity, decreased bone density to hormonal changes, and bad backs to artificial knees, physical changes will affect and dictate the needs of a yoga asana practice, but in all cases, doing yoga will make you feel better.

### General Physiological Changes

Here's the bad news: as you age, your body becomes less flexible, less stable, slower, weaker, and less competitive in endurance. With age you lose elasticity in muscle, fascia, and (as you can see in a mirror) skin. This results in generally less flexibility, which can translate to instability and stiffness. Sarcopenia (muscle loss) and osteopenia (bone loss) are common aspects of aging. Both can contribute to less strength, speed, and endurance. While it does get harder to build muscle with age, it's not impossible, and it's never too late. Exercise and yoga help you maintain the muscle mass you have and continue to add more. Whether you suffer from osteopenia may have as much to do with genetics and gender as it does with your physical activity level, but movement and weight-bearing exercises keep bones healthier for longer.

This information probably doesn't come as a surprise, though; we tend to be well versed in the changes that come with aging, especially as we get older. The good news is that you also have all the attendant wisdom, confidence, and life experience of your years on earth. And let's be honest: while it might be nice to still have the body of a twenty-one-year-old, we know few people who actually want to be twenty-one again (we certainly don't!). Besides, the news gets even better: while age does affect you in

various ways, much of it is in your hands, and there's a lot you can do to limit the effect of age-related changes. Yoga is an excellent anti-aging tool. And it doesn't matter where you're starting from or at what age you begin—movement and yoga can help.

## ***Things That Get Better with Age***

There's plenty of reason to celebrate every passing year: self-confidence, body image, empathy, and decision-making all get better with age.<sup>4</sup> And as we age, our stress levels tend to get lower. People report greater happiness in the later years of their lives—the older we are, the happier we are.<sup>5</sup> In short, things may change, but a lot changes for the better!

## **Common Muscular and Skeletal Complaints**

### **OSTEOPOROSIS/OSTEOPENIA**

**Problem:** As you age, your bone density decreases. For some people, this decrease is so great, it results in osteopenia or osteoporosis, which means their bones are more susceptible to fractures.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Weight-bearing exercises can marginally increase bone density, although the gains are small.<sup>6</sup> Still, yoga is valuable not only because of its potential effect on your physical skeleton but because it helps you build muscle, body awareness, and better balance. Weight-bearing lunge poses, like Warrior I, Warrior II, and side angle pose, help build hip and leg strength; balancing poses like crane, tree, and Warrior III help protect against falls that can cause fractures in already-brittle bones. Because bone density loss makes your spine more fragile, be sure to talk to your medical team to create a plan of safe movements. Depending on the degree of your osteopenia, it might be wise to limit poses that require folding forward or minimize the degree to which you fold. The same is true of poses that require twisting—be gentle in approaching movements that cause your spine to rotate, or skip twisting poses all together.

## ARTHRITIS

**Problem:** Arthritis can cause daily pain in joints like hands, knees, wrists, or elbows. It can make you feel stiff and creaky, limiting comfortable range of motion.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Recent research shows that a regular yoga practice can aid in reducing joint pain and help in improving joint flexibility. A regular yoga practice might also reduce inflammation.<sup>7</sup> In the sequences we offer, you can avoid weight-bearing in your hands and wrists, a common location of arthritis pain.

## SPINAL STENOSIS

**Problem:** Spinal stenosis, the narrowing of the spinal canal or vertebral openings, can squeeze your spinal cord and cause radiating pain and numbness that affects your hips, legs, and even your shoulders.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** A yoga practice that cautiously approaches forward folds and side bending and avoids extension (backbending) poses can help significantly reduce pain. If you have stenosis and osteoporosis, you might avoid forward folds altogether. In general, avoid big, deep movements of the spine. Less is better. Safe yoga, though, can help you build strength and create better postural habits, which can help alleviate chronic pain. An experienced teacher with knowledge of your condition will be a powerful ally.

## DISC ISSUES

**Problem:** Herniated, bulging, or slipped discs can press on your spinal cord or nearby nerves, causing spasms, limited movement, and radiating pain. Disc issues and back pain are more common in the lower lumbar region but may occur anywhere along the spine.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Yoga can help you build core strength and flexibility in your spine, and these two things can go a long way toward remedying back pain. If you experience pain from disc issues, often it is best to avoid forward folds or any pose that causes your spine to round, as this can exacerbate the issue by squeezing the disc more. Instead, focus on



backbending poses and poses that challenge your abdominal muscles and strengthen your hips.

## ***Core Strength and Back Pain***

If you've ever experienced back pain, you've probably been given the advice to strengthen your core. That wisdom is logical—building up the muscles in your trunk, back, abdomen, hips, and legs means that your spine is better supported. Any new movement or exercise that you add to your daily life will likely result in a stronger core; as you move your body in new ways, your major stabilizing muscles have to adapt. Yoga offers specific poses for core strength, too. See Chapter Five for our favorites.

### **NERVE ISSUES: PAIN, NEUROPATHY**

**Problem:** When nerves are injured, pain, weakness, numbness, cramping, or tingling can occur as a result. In peripheral neuropathy, this often occurs in limbs, hands, feet, fingers, and toes. Nerve issues can result from a myriad of illnesses. Often caused by circulatory-system issues, neuropathy also can be a side effect of other diseases or injuries.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Yoga poses improve circulation; movement alone can help! Body awareness is also key. The more you are aware of what exacerbates or helps with pain or numbness, the better you are at making wise choices with your movement practices. Yoga allows you to explore your body in slow, safe movements. It gives you the opportunity to get to know what works for your nerves. Be sure to move slowly and pay careful attention to your body's response in each pose.

### **LIGAMENT TEARS**

**Problem:** Ligament tears are common in aging, stressed, and overused joints, especially knees, shoulders, hips, and ankles. As we age, we put increasing stress on these joints, which can result in abrasions and tears. If the ligaments

give out, or if the joint is degraded, you may find yourself with a replacement.

Tips for your yoga practice: Yoga is useful for ligament issues in several ways: First, yoga helps you strengthen the muscles around your joints. Your knees, for instance, will be better protected if your glutes, hamstrings, and quadriceps are strong. Many common yoga lunge poses help keep your legs strong. Yoga is also useful if you are recovering from a ligament tear injury, as it allows you to continue moving even amidst injury. You should choose a gentler practice as you heal, and omit any poses that exacerbate your injury. Finally, yoga is adaptable enough to continue even if you experience a hip or knee replacement. You'll be able to come back to a yoga practice, and doing yoga after a replacement (with your medical team's approval) may even speed up the healing process.

## TENDONITIS/TENDONOPATHY

Problem: Although it's often a temporary condition, tendon inflammation can cause joint pain and stiffness, and it can also create instability in weight-bearing movements. And as tendons age they can degrade, a condition called *tendonopathy*.

Tips for your yoga practice: Acute tendonitis generally requires some days of rest. But after allowing time to heal, yoga can be useful in helping establish new movement patterns. Because tendonitis is often caused by repetitive movements, practicing a variety of yoga poses offers you a chance to continue movement but in new and various ways—shoring up the muscles around the tendon and giving inflamed areas a chance to heal.

If your health-care team diagnoses tendonopathy, ask which movements are safe and which you should avoid, then follow their directions in your home practice and convey them to your yoga teacher in class. Because of yoga's adaptability, you will be able to find poses and sequences that continue to work for you.

## MYOFASCIAL TIGHTENING, STIFFNESS DUE TO DECREASED COLLAGEN

Problem: As we age, we lose flexibility in our muscles and connective tissue, which results in stiffness, imbalance, and less confidence while

balancing.

Tips for your yoga practice: If you don't use it, you lose it! A regular yoga practice can help reverse some of that acquired stiffness. Gentle, regular stretching can help keep your body fluid and flexible. We're often as amazed as our yoga students when we see the changes that habitual stretching and movement can confer. You don't have to touch your toes, but yoga might get you a little closer to them.

## **Systemic Issues**

### TEMPERATURE REGULATION

#### Hormonal Changes/Hot Flashes

Problem: In women, menopause can bring temperature changes and hot flashes.

Tips for your yoga practice: Some studies have shown that a restorative yoga practice can help decrease the hot flashes that can come with hormonal changes.<sup>8</sup> During a yoga class, it can also be helpful to lighten the amount of clothing you're wearing or dress in layers so that when you feel warm, you can peel off a longer-sleeved shirt. Some yoga classes are warmer than other others. If you plan to attend a class, ask in advance about the temperature of the room.

#### Chill

Problem: Feeling chilly can be a result of circulatory issues or simply overactive air conditioners. Trying to stretch cold, unprepared tissues can lead to injury. And being too cold to relax will set the wrong tone for your practice.

Tips for your yoga practice: Warmth is your friend for both relaxation and stretching. Some of this warmth is generated internally as you move. Take time to ease into your practice with gentle but dynamic movements linked to your breath, such as inhaling to lift your arms or take your hands to prayer position, and exhaling to lower your arms again. And be sure to wear layers so that you can remove them as your practice builds heat and put them back on later as your practice cools down. Take advantage of yoga blankets,

which are common in yoga classes. These can be used during seated or supine poses during class to add warmth.

## BLOOD PRESSURE

**Problem:** High blood pressure is one of the most common ailments that affect adults as they age. One in three American adults has high blood pressure.<sup>9</sup> Rapidly transitioning from standing upright to folding forward can exacerbate dizziness, a common symptom of low blood pressure and a side effect of common medications for high blood pressure.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Some studies show that regular yoga can lower blood pressure, so a routine yoga practice will help.<sup>10</sup> As you move, avoid transitions that put your head below your heart, and opt out of sequences that require you to move quickly from standing to forward folding.

## RESPIRATORY ISSUES

### Asthma

**Problem:** Age-related lung changes can aggravate asthma, so as you age, bouts of asthma may increase.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** If your asthma is provoked by exercise, yoga is a good fit, since with yoga your heart rate stays relatively low. Keep in mind that in some classes yoga teachers use essential oils or incense to enhance the students' experience. While this is a lovely intention, if you are asthmatic, strong scents can be triggers. It's appropriate to ask in advance if these types of scents will be used in class and to request that they be omitted. Calling ahead to verify this may be the wisest choice.

### COPD, Chronic Bronchitis, and Emphysema

**Problem:** Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic bronchitis, and emphysema make breathing very challenging and limit your ability to do cardiovascular activities.

**Tips for your yoga practice:** Yoga is low impact. For this reason, it is a useful movement practice if you have COPD or similar respiratory problems. Additionally, a yoga practice often has pranayama, or breath practices.

Focusing on inhaling and exhaling can be useful if you have a chronic breathing problem, since breathing exercises can potentially help strengthen muscles used in respiration. Time spent in mindful breathing can also help you have more awareness of your breath; noticing when you get breathless or when you feel short of breath can help you seek treatment quickly.

## VISION ISSUES

### Reduced Vision/Cataracts

Problem: Cloudy vision, a result of cataracts, affects half of Americans seventy-five and older.<sup>11</sup> Though treatable, cataracts can affect vision prior to treatment.

Tips for your yoga practice: It's safe to practice yoga if you're undergoing treatment for cataracts. Prior to treatment, if you have reduced vision or impairment, practice closer to your instructor, or practice near a wall so you can find support in balance poses, since they may be more challenging without clear visual information.

### Glaucoma

Problem: Glaucoma can affect aging eyes, causing reduced vision, pain, and intraocular pressure.

Tips for your yoga practice: Yoga is generally safe if you have glaucoma, though some poses should be omitted from your practice. Inversions and any pose that requires your head to be below your heart should be avoided. In many cases these poses can be modified; downward-facing dog, for instance, can be done at the wall or using a chair, and this way you can keep your head level with your heart, eliminating pressure on your eyes.

## VERTIGO AND VESTIBULAR ISSUES

Problem: Vertigo and vestibular issues can cause extreme dizziness and fast shifts in balance.

Tips for your yoga practice: During yoga, make all your transitions intentional. Use special care when turning to one side and moving from the floor to standing and back again. Do a slower yoga practice, and avoid

sequences that require you to move from seated to standing multiple times. Practice near a wall or with a chair nearby so that you can modify your balance practice when needed.

## INSOMNIA AND SLEEP ISSUES

Problem: Night wakefulness or restlessness may disrupt sleep.

Tips for your yoga practice: Intentional, slow breathing can foster a sense of relaxation and calm. A slow yoga and stretching routine before bed can help encourage drowsiness and tranquility. In fact, studies show that yoga can help you fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer.<sup>12</sup> Exercise of any type helps tire us out and promotes exhaustion, which can lead to better quality sleep.

## CHRONIC ILLNESS

Problem: Chronic illness can cause pain and hopelessness and may create limitations to practicing yoga.

Tips for your yoga practice: Yoga can be effective as a pain-management tool for painful diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia.<sup>13</sup> Since yoga is so adaptable, it can be practiced in a chair or hospital bed. It may also be a helpful meditative tool for those diagnosed with a terminal illness.

## ***Steadiness and Ease***

The Yoga Sutras contain bits of wisdom and yoga philosophy. This text is one of the earliest yoga books. Regarding yoga poses, the sutras don't say much. Yoga sutra 2.46 tells us simply that yoga poses should be steady and comfortable. Knowing that this is the only prescription for the poses frees us from feeling like our yoga practice has to look a certain way. A yoga student can do a handstand, or not; a lunge, or not; a balance pose, or not. Your practice is your practice. Find strength and ease, and do what works for you.

## Chapter 3: A Lifetime in the Studio

Yoga is best when it includes both consistency and variety. The key is to establish a consistent practice, whether that's five minutes a day or three sessions a week. Once that's in place, variety matters. Your body adapts to the familiar and then plateaus; it can be easy to check out mentally while going through routines you know inside and out. You've probably got consistency down. As we age, we can become more set in our ways, preferring the familiarity of our regular routines: doing the same workouts, sitting on the same spot on the couch, eating the same meals. But variety is what challenges us to continue to grow and adapt.

That's where attending a class comes in. Yoga studios offer experienced instructors, props, poses, and sequences that may be different from what you'd choose at home. Attending a class can challenge you physically, by introducing you to new postures and types of movement, and it can challenge you mentally, since it may be unfamiliar territory for you.

Aging bodies are generally tighter and may have special needs, so unless a class specifically focuses on healthy aging, some modifications may be needed so the class is the right fit for you. When you walk into a yoga class, you should feel comfortable, confident, and safe. This chapter will give you the tools to make that happen.

### Styles of Yoga

When you head to a yoga studio or gym, you may feel a little stumped while perusing the yoga schedule. Yoga is an umbrella term for a movement practice that has dozens of approaches and styles. While yoga classes may offer similar poses, the tempo of the sequences and focus of each class may vary widely. Here's a brief primer of different styles of yoga.

*Flow* is yoga that moves quickly—often at a rate of one breath per movement. The poses are linked together, so you move seamlessly from one to the other. Other terms that denote a similar style of yoga include *power flow*, *Ashtanga*, *Baptiste*, or *vinyasa*. These classes often include a focus on plank pose and other poses that require weight-bearing for the upper body. If

you're brand new to yoga, you might find the pace of the class challenging, since often the poses are called out by their Sanskrit or English names but not described or demonstrated.

*Hatha* technically refers to the physical practice of yoga poses, and most yoga taught in the West falls under the umbrella of *hatha*. Generally, though, the name *hatha* included on a yoga schedule refers to a class that moves a little slower. The poses won't necessarily flow from one to the other. You can expect to do poses that are more basic, so it's a good class for beginners.

A class labeled *gentle*, *healthy aging*, or *senior yoga* will be mellow and mindful, with a focus on seated poses or modified versions of standing poses. An easy entry point to yoga, these classes are great for athletic recovery and may be the perfect fit for you, or you might desire a little more challenge and variety.

*Restorative yoga* is even mellow: you use props like blankets and bolsters to deeply relax. In restorative classes you'll be in various supported poses (usually lying down) the entire class. These classes offer recovery and rest. We highly recommend you try one!

*Yin yoga* involves holding low-to-the-ground and seated poses for several minutes at a time. While you don't move quickly, long holds offer a different type of challenge. Proponents of *yin yoga* contend that longer holds allow the joints to refresh and soft tissues to release deeply.

Anything labeled *Iyengar* or *alignment-based* will include clear, detailed anatomical instruction and the use of props. These classes will also typically move slower and may be a great place to start your practice.

*Heated yoga* refers to yoga in a room heated between 75 and 105 degrees, and sometimes higher. If it's *Bikram*, a specific style of heated yoga, a set series of twenty-six poses will always be practiced. Some practitioners enjoy the heat and feel that it aids the practice. Very hot classes may not be suitable for all people, though. Core temperatures can get dangerously high in a hot room, and the heat can confer a false sense of flexibility that may encourage you to push too far, leading to injury. Talk to your health-care provider before taking a heated class.

*Yoga for athletes* is taught by an instructor who understands sport-specific needs and may teach sequences that correspond to the cycles of training and



racing. At best, it is not an athletic, workout-style class; it's yoga for tight and tired people who get their workouts elsewhere. You can expect a focus on release, strength, stamina, and injury prevention.

While this list of yoga styles is a good place to begin, it's not comprehensive. New styles of yoga are constantly being created, and different teachers and studios may have varying interpretations of these terms. Studios often post class descriptions on their websites, so look for those before heading to class. You can also contact the studio or individual instructor to ask for more details about what to expect in a class you plan to attend.

## **Which Yoga Class Is Right for You?**

Since there are so many different styles of yoga, what type of class you choose to attend is a matter of preference and fit. You don't have to enjoy all styles of yoga. You might find—as we have—that the different seasons of our lives have brought us to different teachers and styles. That's important to remember: if you attend a class and it doesn't feel right for you, try a different class. After a few tries, you'll find a class and teacher you really enjoy.

As you approach a studio class, keep in mind that your yoga practice should complement the other movement practices in your life, not compete with them. For instance, if you're recovering from a match or a long week at work, a gentle, yin, or restorative class may be a good fit. If you're returning home after a visit with grandchildren, same thing: a class like restorative may be a great way to unwind. If you want more cardio or would like to build upper-body strength, a fast-paced flow class could be fun. If you tolerate high heat well and don't have any conditions that prohibit you from being in a very warm room, a heated class could be a nice way to fight the chill of a cold winter. If you're brand new to yoga, a hatha or alignment class might cover the basics a little more slowly. You could also find an Introduction to Yoga class if you want to ask questions or spend more time on key poses.

## **Using Props in a Studio Class**

Props are an important addition to a yoga practice. They can allow poses to be more accessible, challenging, or gentle for our bodies. Since your goal in

a class is to make the practice safe and comfortable, plan to gather several props at the beginning of class. Studios are generally equipped with props that include blocks, bolsters, blankets, and straps. You may also find eye pillows, sandbags, and stools or chairs.

Sometimes an instructor in a class will cue you to get a certain prop before the class begins, but don't wait for your instructor to suggest props, as he or she may not. Collect props that allow you to move gracefully into poses and support your injuries or health concerns. If the studio supply allows, help yourself to one strap and one bolster, and two blocks and two blankets. It's better to have the props and not use them than to want them and not have them handy. We both agree that the obvious sign of a seasoned yoga practitioner is the number of props she has near her mat. The more props, the longer she's done yoga! Experienced yogis know that props are tools to support a better yoga practice. Yoga blocks are small, firm rectangular blocks, often made of heavier foam or wood. Any time the ground feels far away (especially in forward folds or lunges), a yoga block or two—one under each hand—can serve as the buttress for better ease, helping you find safe alignment for your knees, hips, shoulders, and back. In lunge poses, it's easy to lose integrity in the pose by trying to get your hands to the ground, which rounds your back in potentially painful ways. Placing a yoga block under each hand helps keep your arms and your back in a straighter line. This allows you to find correct alignment and feel a “just right” stretch instead of a stretch that goes too far.

Blocks, as well as bolsters or blankets, can also serve as seats. Since we don't often sit on the floor, it can feel challenging for our hips and knees when we do this for any period of time. Yoga classes often begin and end in seated meditation, so getting comfortable for that duration of class is essential. Lifting your hips higher than your knees will feel kinder to your body, and it will help you retain good posture by allowing your pelvis to rest in a neutral position instead of a backward tilt. Sitting on a block, blanket, or bolster is a great use of these props. Try sitting on a bolster or block with your legs in a criss-cross position, or try using the bolster as a saddle while you kneel. Either way, you'll probably notice that sitting on the ground is a lot more comfortable with the addition of one or more props.

These same three props—blocks, bolsters, and blankets—can be used for restorative yoga and supported poses. Bolsters can give your upper body a lift in supported fish pose and can elevate your hips in supported bridge

pose. They can also be used in the final relaxation pose, *savasana* (corpse pose), which is typically practiced at the end of most classes. For *savasana* the bolster can be slid under the knees (which offers support for your low back) or placed under your head like a pillow. When your class moves toward *savasana*, use these props to make the experience sweeter.

Depending on your body, your bones may be close to the surface of your skin. This may mean that belly-down prone positions are uncomfortable for your hips or pelvis. Bolsters and blankets can be used under your hips to provide padding. In kneeling or low-lunge poses, these same props can be used under knees to offer a buffer between you and the ground. In a resting pose like child's pose, they can be used under your forehead. Any time the ground feels too hard, use a bolster or blanket as support.

Yoga straps are six to ten feet in length and made of thick woven canvas. They have a plastic or metal buckle so the ends can be easily joined. When you're in a class, you can use a yoga strap as an extension of your arm. If you're reaching for your foot (as is common in standing balance poses or seated forward folds), and your hands don't quite make it to your feet, you can use your strap to fill in the gap and help you make the connection.

Stools or chairs can be used as seats if sitting on the ground isn't in your practice. They are particularly useful if you're recovering from a knee injury or find going from seated to standing especially taxing. Stools and chairs can also be used as bolsters in some restorative poses, including legs up the wall, or as tools for balance poses. You can place a hand on a chair for support as you build your balance and leg strength. We commonly use chairs for modified versions of poses, as an alternative to putting your hands on the ground. This is especially useful if you have vertigo, glaucoma, or high blood pressure.

Eye pillows and sandbags can make restorative poses and *savasana* (corpse pose, the final resting position at the end of class) even more restful. Eye pillows can help you block out light and withdraw your senses, making relaxation easier to find. Sandbags can be placed over your hips to weigh your body toward the earth; this is a comforting weight, like holding a small pet on your lap.

As you practice more yoga, you'll get to know the props that make your practice more accessible for you. If you tend to have tighter hamstrings,

setting up with two blocks and a strap will be helpful. If you have low body fat, and you always feel the ground under your hips, make sure to have a blanket on hand for any prone poses. If you have tight hip flexors, a bolster, block, or blanket will make seated poses much more comfortable.

## ***Contentment***

When you think about using props, consider the yogic idea of *santosha*, or contentment. Props can help make a shape comfortable and accessible, and they can be soft and supportive. Don't think of props as a crutch or an admission of defeat. Instead, practice *santosha* by being happy with your body in this moment, just as it is, and use the tools that make you most comfortable.

## **Touch and Scent in the Studio Class**

Instructors often offer “hands-on assists” in studio classes. This means that the instructor might touch your arms, shoulders, ankles, hips, back, neck, head, or feet during the practice or while you're in *savasana*. Often an instructor will make an announcement at the start of class, letting you know what to expect, but this is not always the case. It's always okay to request no touching—you can tell your instructor before class begins or let her know when she moves toward you to offer physical assistance.

The purpose of hands-on assists can vary. Generally, instructors might offer a gentle touch to help you move into the pose in a way that “deepens” or offers more sensation. Sometimes an instructor is trying to help you avoid overstrain or injury, so she might realign your knee or another part of the body. Most commonly, though, hands-on assists are about relaxation. If your shoulders are tightly drawn toward your ears, a gentle touch can be a reminder to relax them down. If your instructor notices your body storing tension, she might place her hands on your shoulders and encourage you to soften your upper body. In *savasana* the purpose of touch is always relaxation. In that part of class the instructor might touch your head, shoulders, neck, or even your face.

The power of touch is important. As you age, your family may be farther away from you and you may not see your friends and community as much as you did when you were more active. There may be fewer opportunities for physical touch in your life. Genuine human connection can help us feel more peaceful and at ease, and you might find that feeling your instructor touch your head in savasana helps you release much more deeply than when you just lie down to rest on your own.

In some classes, the relaxation experience is deepened by scent. Your instructor might burn incense before or during class or she might touch your head or shoulders with an essential oil during class or in savasana. These odors have a purpose; essential oils like sandalwood and lavender can be calming, while mint or citrus might help you feel more clearheaded. These smells might seem wonderful and inviting to you, or they may be aggravating if you have asthma or respiratory issues. Don't hesitate to ask your instructor about this—or even call the studio in advance—if you have concerns. It is completely within your rights to request that no scent be used in a class you plan to attend or to ask to be directed to scent-free classes.

## **Setup for Hearing and Vision Issues**

If going to a yoga class is a new experience, it can be tempting to hide in the back of the room. Depending on how many other students are in class and how large the studio is, it may be much easier to hear if you set up your mat closer to the teacher. While some instructors move around the room, they will generally start and end the class from a specific spot, and teachers usually speak most quietly at the start and end of class. Set up closest to that spot to hear the instructor best and to have an unobstructed view of the poses they demonstrate. Keep in mind that it is okay to peek at others in the class if the instructor doesn't demonstrate a pose or if you can't get a good view of the pose or transition he's offering. You certainly don't want to stare, but it's not poor etiquette to discreetly check out what others are doing.

## **Postural Shifts**

Many yoga classes begin with sun salutations, which involve moving from a standing position to a standing forward fold and back again, one breath at a time. If you have vertigo or blood pressure issues, transitions like this can be destabilizing. In general, keeping your head above your heart will reduce the

strain that quick postural shifts can put on your blood pressure. This might mean that you move more slowly than your neighbors in class, and that's fine. There are also many classes—like gentle yoga or yoga for healthy aging—that will offer sequences with fewer head-below-your-heart transitions.

The same thing goes for moving from reclining to standing and back again. While some classes might offer fun transitions to get you up or down, you should always feel free to take the path that suits you best. Instead of rolling from your back to a squat and lifting from there to standing, for example, you might turn to one side, press up to sitting, step one foot to the floor, and come up slowly. Take things at a pace that helps you feel steady, balanced, and in control.

## **Yoga Class and Community**

Aging adults are flocking to yoga in droves. A recent study reports that thirty-six million Americans do yoga, and fourteen million of those yogis are over fifty years old.<sup>14</sup> When you go to yoga you'll be joining a community of peers. And since we think you should make yoga a habit, if you regularly attend a particular class, you'll be making friends and acquaintances and connecting with people who have similar interests in health, wellness, and feeling good. Isolation can most certainly be a part of aging: you may retire, move to a new area, or just have fewer reasons to socialize. A routine yoga class gives you ample opportunity to connect with others in an environment that is welcoming and nonjudgmental. And while yoga classes aren't exactly places for small talk, chatting with your classmate one mat over before or after class is completely welcome in the yoga studio environment. You will probably find your fellow yogis to be pretty friendly. Yoga studios tend to offer classes, workshops, and special events like *kirtan* (an evening of chanting and singing). Attending these additional offerings may help you make deeper connections to the studio, instructors, and regular practitioners. While it's fine to try various studios, building community in one place may be the easiest way to create roots and develop connection.

## **Communication with Your Instructor**

When you come into a yoga class your instructor wants to hear from you! This is especially the case if you have bodily concerns or questions. Plan to

arrive to class at least ten minutes early. Introduce yourself to the instructor and let her know your concerns.

When you bring up injuries, illnesses, or other health issues to your instructor she may suggest modifications for your practice or poses to avoid. Yoga instructors are generally very knowledgeable about the human body and anatomy but may have limited experience with your specific health issue. Tell your instructor what you're struggling with, but don't expect that she will necessarily know on the spot the best course of action for you.

Many instructors also have a presence on social media or email, so if you feel shy, contact the instructor in advance. That also gives the instructor a chance to familiarize himself with your particular concern and consider ways yoga can be adapted to your needs. You can follow up with questions or comments after class via email, too.

Depending on the style of yoga class you attend, asking questions during the practice may be acceptable, or it may disrupt the flow. You will have to determine the etiquette of the class you're in, but don't be afraid to ask questions before or after class. We love when people pick our brains to solve a problem or ask about ways a pose can be suited to address their needs. It's one of our favorite parts of teaching!

## **Your Body, the Ultimate Instructor**

Part of the joy of going to a yoga class is being led by a well-trained and experienced practitioner. But you're still the person ultimately in charge of your health and safety. You can and should ask questions and seek guidance from your yoga teachers, but you must always listen to your body above all else.

If you are experiencing an injury, chronic issue, or illness, do your research in advance of a yoga class. What movements are contraindicated for your issue? What should you avoid? What might exacerbate or ease your problem? Discuss this with your primary care doctor or your specialist. In addition, the internet abounds with reputable sources to help you determine what parts of the practice will be a boon for you and what parts may be unhelpful. Once you determine your needs around your body's limitations, you will feel more comfortable in class.

When you are in poses or moving through a sequence, listen to your body and try to determine the difference between pain (*ouch!*) and challenge (*oh, spicy!*). Pain is to be avoided, especially if it's joint pain. Challenge in the belly of a muscle—like the sensation of your quads “burning” during a lunge sequence or feeling heat in your foot during a balance pose—is a beneficial part of yoga class. Those types of challenges mean you're building muscular strength.

When you move into a pose that encourages flexibility, you have to pay attention to sensations there, too. When you stretch and there's tightness, it can feel like a strong sensation. Is that sensation pain, or is it a release? Is the challenge creating beneficial flexibility, or is it turning on the sympathetic, panicked nervous system because you're pushing too far? You're the only person who can know that. Cultivating careful listening to your body's needs and limits is an important aspect of yoga. That ability to hear and obey your limitations comes with time. The longer you practice yoga, the easier it is to abide by your body's needs. In the meantime, as you get familiar with listening to your body, err on the side of caution. Do less. Back off. Over time, you'll know when you can push to your personal edge. But it's always better to be safe than to end up injured.

We've already talked about props. You don't have to wait for the instructor to cue them or offer them—if you feel like a prop would make a pose or sequence more accessible to you, then get the props you need! Modify your practice to meet your needs. It's your practice and your body. You can even go a step beyond simply modifying. What if the pose being offered is not comfortable or possible for your body? What if you're not sure how to modify a particular pose? You can always choose to do something different. Perhaps you have a hamstring injury and the instructor is teaching full splits; that's not going to work for you. You could opt to practice lunge poses instead. Going rogue in a yoga class is okay, especially if you are choosing to do so to protect your body or care for an injury. Your instructor will understand, particularly if you already discussed your injury or concern in advance.

If a class is moving too quickly for you or involves a lot of standing and sitting, you can rest in a seated position or child's pose at any point. You could even take savasana early if you feel like you have already done the work you need in the dynamic portion of class.



Attending a studio class can be a wonderful, challenging, and enlightening experience. Enjoy the varying sequences and the challenge of trying something new. Try multiple classes, communicate with your instructor, and set up, use props, and modify as needed to make sure the class fits your needs. Above all, listen to your body!

## ***Self-Knowledge***

An important idea in yoga philosophy is *svadhyaya*, which means “self-study.” Every time you do a yoga practice, you get a chance to listen to yourself, notice your needs, and heed your body’s messages. Every quiet moment in a pose gives you an opportunity to get curious about yourself. Over time, this self-knowledge allows you to find your personal edge confidently and also to work within your own limitations for safety. It all fits together: the more you do yoga, the more you get to know yourself; the more you know yourself, the more likely you are to get the most out of your yoga practice.

# **PART II: SOLVING PROBLEMS WITH YOGA**

# Chapter 4: Become Fall-Proof: Building Better Balance in Space

Aging bodies need a strong balance practice. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one out of four people over sixty-five falls each year, and having a fall doubles your chances of another fall.<sup>15</sup> One way to avoid falls as you enter this age cohort is to develop and maintain a strong balance-pose practice, and it's never too late to start. The key is to find the right level of challenge to encourage you to improve—if there's no challenge, there's no change—but not so much that you're overwhelmed or disheartened.

Let's investigate the practices that make balance easier, then look at a series of poses for you to build and sharpen your balance abilities.

## Alignment Tips for Balance

Several different systems have to work in harmony for you to balance in space. Your vestibular system, nervous system, sense of sight, and muscle strength all contribute. Here are some tips to help you get these systems on board.

### USE THE ARCHES OF THE FOOT

An open-minded investigation of how your weight is felt in your feet will help you tune in to the feedback your feet can give. If your feet aren't in pain, practice standing poses in bare feet. (If active plantar fasciitis, a pain in your heel and along your arches, or some other condition means keeping your shoes on feels better, rest assured that you're still improving balance even while shod.) Notice the places that bear your weight as you stand, and seek to distribute the weight evenly between your heel bones, the base of your pinky toes, and the base of your big toes.

### SOFTEN YOUR KNEES

There are more than twenty-five joints in your foot, and only two between your ankle and your pelvis—the hip and the knee. Trying too hard in standing balance poses will often include locking up around your knee by tightening the muscles and forcing the joint into the limits of its potential for extension, adding stress. Instead, seek to stay soft in your knees so that you can access the micro-corrections that happen from the foot. This may not register as much of a bend, but it will give you room to find dynamic balance without strain.

## FIND PELVIC ALIGNMENT AND DEVELOP HIP STRENGTH

A strength or flexibility imbalance between the muscles at the front of your pelvis (your hip flexors) and those at the back (your hamstrings) will affect how you hold your pelvis in space, and thereby make balance poses more difficult and uncomfortable for your core and leg muscles. A few standing pelvic tilts will help you feel the movement available in your pelvis, between the range of being tilted far forward and being tilted far back. Look for a level alignment in the middle that feels comfortable in your back while inviting a slight pull of your navel toward your spine and an engaged feeling across your abs, from your pubic bone to your sternum. One way to check this is to locate your pubic bone (about where the base of your pants zipper starts) and your hip points, the two bony parts along the front of your hips, then make sure these three landmarks form a triangle that aligns perpendicular to the floor.

Seek balance not only front to back but also along the outside of each hip, left and right. When your outer hip muscles aren't as strong as they could be, your pelvis will tip when you shift your weight into one leg, and one hip point will drop lower than the other. Practicing in front of a mirror while holding your hands on your hips can help you see when this happens. Having strong hip muscles is critical to preventing sideways falls, which can cause hip fractures.

## STEADY YOUR GAZE

What you're looking at matters, especially in balance poses. Instead of jumping your gaze from spot to spot, choose one focal point and keep your eyes on it. We call this *drishti*, your gazing point. When you're just starting

out or engaged in challenging balance poses, your gazing point might be low to the floor, which helps keep you steady. As you gain balance you can choose a spot at eye level or higher as an anchor for your gaze. For an even greater challenge, try blinking your eyes slowly or even closing them as you balance.

## **HOLD AN UNMOVING OBJECT**

Resting a hand or even a fingertip against the wall, a tabletop, or a counter can bring immense stability to your balance pose. Balancing at the wall or while holding on to a table or seat back may feel elementary. Don't assume that holding on for more support means you aren't building strength and improving balance. Not so! Balancing at the wall is a great way to gain muscular strength and begin to build up your feet, core, and proprioception (sense of where you are in space). This challenges you at the appropriate level and allows your balance skills to adapt progressively.

Balancing is not easy, though it does become easier with practice. When you are right on the verge of balancing, it's tempting and natural to hold your breath, as though the small movements of breathing will disrupt the delicate balance. This isn't a sustainable long-term plan! Keep your breath flowing freely in and out as you work on your balance. You'll find that the breath supports balance poses from the inside, as it engages your core muscles.

## **Double-Leg Balance Poses**

### **MOUNTAIN**



*[Figure 4-1](#). Mountain*

The root of all yoga poses, and particularly of balance poses, is mountain pose (*tadasana*, [Figure 4-1](#)). Fittingly, it is the first we offer you. In mountain pose you should feel stable, steady, and grounded, like a mountain. Stand with your feet hip-distance apart, weight evenly distributed between and across both feet. Find a level pelvis with light core engagement—this feels like a slight tightening through your belly and the sensation you get right at the start of a sit-up: a tiny drop of your lowest ribs inward. Relax your shoulder

blades down your back, stay open across your chest, and lift up through the crown of your head.

**TALL MOUNTAIN**



*[Figure 4-2](#). Tall mountain*

Once you've memorized the alignment of mountain pose, you can challenge yourself by moving into tall mountain pose ([Figure 4-2](#)). Lift your arms



overhead and notice what changes. If you feel a backbend beginning, use your abdominal muscles to pull yourself back into neutral alignment. For a greater challenge, try lifting your heels off the floor. This can be a very slight lift, just enough to feel the increased demand on your core. In time you may be able to lift up to the balls of your feet with your heels quite high. Remember, holding on to the wall or a surface that's the height of a table or counter can help you develop the strength and awareness needed for good balance.

## CHAIR



*Figure 4-3. Chair*

In chair pose (*utkatasana*, [Figure 4-3](#)) you'll flex your hips and knees while seeking to maintain mountain pose alignment through your legs, pelvis,

and spine. This challenges you to feel where your body is in space and to hold your spine supported in neutral, all with a healthy balance between your abdominal muscles and your back muscles. When you hold the pose for more than a few breaths, you'll quickly feel how chair pose demands muscular strength through your entire lower body. Working on this strength will help immensely in every other balance pose and activity you do. From mountain pose, sit back in an imaginary chair. Keep your knees facing forward as your hips move back and down. Your arms can either be at your side, in prayer position at your chest, reaching forward at shoulder height, or overhead.

### CHAIR WITH TWIST



*[Figure 4-4](#) . Loose chair twist*

Up the ante on your chair pose by adding an easy twist ([Figure 4-4](#)). To ensure that the work of the twist is coming from your core muscles,

specifically the oblique muscles that crisscross your waist, hold your knees and hips quite still as you twist. For a stretch across your chest, spread your arms; for a lighter sensation in your shoulders, hold your hands in prayer position. Switch sides.

## **SQUAT**

A squat is an efficient pose for stretching many things at once: your low back, rear end, thighs, lower legs, and feet. Depending on your skeletal anatomy and any history of injury, you may need to choose just one of the following options.

### **Ball Squat**



*[Figure 4-5](#). Ball squat*

A tight squat tucks your body into a ball shape ([Figure 4-5](#)). Bend your knees deeply and frame them with your elbows. Your heels do not need to

stay on the floor. To challenge your balance, keep your spine long and your chest open; to stretch your back, tuck your chin toward your knees.

## Wide Squat

A wider squat, called *malasana*, or garland pose ([Figure 4-6](#)), adds an inner thigh stretch. Bend your knees deeply and angle them wide, taking your elbows inside your knees. Again, your heels don't have to stay on the floor. To work on balance, rest your hands on your thighs or in prayer position with your elbows gently propping your knees open.



*Figure 4-6. Wide squat*

Wide Squat with Twist





*Figure 4-7. Wide squat with twist*

Adding a twist to the squat ([Figure 4-7](#)) will stretch your back and chest. Take your right hand to your right knee or the floor as you raise your left arm

and look up. For a more gentle twist, rest your left hand on your left thigh as you twist to the left. Switch sides.

## Supported Squat

A history of back or knee injury requires adjusting for comfort in a squat. To modify either the ball squat or the wide squat, use support under your seat ([Figure 4-8](#)). This could be a stack of blocks, a roll of blankets, or a low table. If your heels won't stay down and you'd like to add support to create more steadiness, slip a blanket or towel under your heels.



*Figure 4-8. Supported squat*

Goddess Squat



*[Figure 4-9](#). Goddess squat*

A higher squat, goddess pose ([Figure 4-9](#)), requires less stretching and more strength building. Because this squat is not as deep, it may be the kinder variation if you have knee concerns. In this taller squat, keep your hips level

with or above your knees. Have your knees and toes facing out, so that your big toes are visible when you look down—this helps protect your knees. Your hands can rest on your hips, or, for more spice, lift them to prayer position, forward, or overhead. To further challenge your balance, try lifting one or both heels.

## Single-Leg Balance Poses

These eight balance poses (split into pairs) can be modified to suit your needs. In each pair the leg is drawn in one direction (forward, to the side, backward, or across the midline of your body) and is either straight or bent. If you find one of the poses in a pair to be easier than the other, make sure you don't simply play to your strengths and practice only the pose you enjoy. Challenge yourself to improve by practicing the pose that is more difficult.

Practice mountain pose before each of these balance poses. Balance poses should be done on both sides and held for as long as you can stay balanced, or for fifteen breaths, whichever comes first. Keep in mind your own imbalances, as we explored in Chapter One. You might want to hold one side longer than the other, or repeat the pose on the side you perceive to be weaker.

### LEG FORWARD

#### Crane, Toe Forward

Start in mountain pose. Shift your weight to your right leg and, without leaning your torso back, extend your left leg in front of you for crane pose ([Figure 4-10](#)). While getting acclimated to this position you can point your toes and keep them on the floor. As you gain strength and balance, flex your foot and lift your raised leg so that it moves toward a forty-five-degree or even a ninety-degree angle. Switch sides.



*Figure 4-10. Crane with leg extended*

Crane, Knee Bent

Start in mountain pose. Shift your weight to your right leg and bring your left knee forward without shifting your torso for a bent-knee version of crane ([Figure 4-11](#)). For more ease keep the toes of your left foot on the floor. For more work lift your left knee to hip height. Switch sides.



*[Figure 4-11](#). Crane with knee bent*

## LEG TO THE SIDE

### Abduction: Standing Star

Start in mountain pose. Lift your left leg out to the side and, if it feels natural, slightly backward to make a standing star shape ([Figure 4-12](#)). While you get used to this shape you can keep your left toes on the floor. For more challenge lift your leg higher. It's okay for your pelvis to be at an angle here; find the pathway that yields the best balance. Add challenge by lifting your arms. Then switch sides.





*[Figure 4-12](#). Standing star*

### External Rotation: Tree with Modifications

Start in mountain pose. Bend your left knee and rotate from your hip so your left knee points out to the side to a degree that feels comfortable. Keep the ball of your foot down and rest your heel toward the inner ankle of your right foot for a low tree pose (*vrksasana*, [Figure 4-13](#)). Your hands can hold

on to a support, rest on your hips, lift to prayer position, or spread out to each side like limbs on a tree. As you gain control here, lift your foot so that its arch rests against your right leg calf in a slightly higher tree pose ([Figure 4-14](#)). Rest your hands in prayer position or stretch your arms out to each side or overhead. Switch sides.



*[Figure 4-13](#). Low tree*



*Figure 4-14. Tree*

LEG BACKWARD

## Warrior III

Start in mountain pose. Hinge from your hips and send your right leg behind you, forming a long line from the back foot through the crown of your head in Warrior III (*Virabhadrasana III*, [Figure 4-15](#)). As you gain control here, lower your torso and lift your leg in equal amounts, maintaining this long line. For more of a challenge, bring your hands into prayer position or extend your arms alongside your hips, out to the sides, or even overhead. Switch sides.



*Figure 4-15 . Warrior III*

Dancer with Modifications

Start in mountain pose. Bend your right knee and send your foot behind you. Reach the same-side hand for your foot in dancer's pose (*Natarajasana*, [Figure 4-16](#)). If your hand doesn't reach your foot, use a tie or belt as a strap, or rest your foot on a chair seat ([Figure 4-17](#)). If it feels okay for your knee, kick your foot into your hand, lift your thigh, and hinge from your hips, as you did in Warrior III, to lower your chest forward. Your free arm can hold on to a steady surface, rest with the palm on a wall, or lift up in the air. Repeat on the other side.



*[Figure 4-16](#). Dancer, hand to foot*





*Figure 4-17. Dancer, with chair*

**LEG ACROSS MIDLINE**

## Adduction Leg Swings

Start in mountain pose. Lift your left leg out to the side, reach it slightly forward, then swing it across the midline to cross in front of your opposite leg ([Figure 4-18](#)). Continue with this dynamic movement, linking it with your breath: inhale to swing wide, exhale to swing across. Feel free to hold on to a chair or wall as you swing, or to extend your arms for control of the balance. For more challenge, rest your hands in prayer position. Repeat on the other side.



*[Figure 4-18](#). Leg swings across the midline*

## ***Change the Challenge***

Balancing on a hard surface is easier—it gives you more stability and access to feedback from the nerves. To make the balance more challenging, try standing on a soft surface, such as a rug, carpet, or folded yoga mat. For yet more challenge, try blinking your eyes slowly or closing your eyes completely. And for even more spice, make the pose dynamic: move an arm or leg through space while standing on one leg.

### **Eagle/Figure Four**

Start in mountain pose. Cross your left leg over your right, bend your knees, and send your hips back to a low eagle pose (*garudasana*, [Figure 4-19](#)). Your left toes can rest on the floor, or float just above it. To add challenge, cross your arms, too, right over left, either at the wrists or at the elbows. If this is too much for your right knee, take a Charlie Chaplin stance for an easy eagle pose ([Figure 4-20](#)), with the ball of your bent leg to the floor. Then switch sides.

For a slightly different challenge that might suit your knees better, instead of a tight cross of your legs, go for a loose cross of your left ankle over your right knee, making a figure four ([Figure 4-21](#)). Bring your hands to prayer position. You can adjust the stretch and balance challenge by lowering your hips back and down.



*Figure 4-19. Low eagle*



*Figure 4-20. Easy eagle*



*Figure 4-21. Figure four*

# Chapter 5: Cultivate Deep Resilience: Core Strength

Becoming fall-proof isn't just about being balanced in space. It also takes strength through your core. And to build strength, you have to challenge your core muscles. You can't just sit on the sofa wishing for a strong core! Instead, you have to exercise. The moves described in this chapter will get you started.

The need for core strength and awareness in aging bodies is well documented. When your core is strong, your spine is well supported, which keeps your back, shoulders, and hips safer from injury. But the phrase “strong core” can mean different things. For us, having a strong core means the main muscles of your abdominals are activating appropriately and doing the work in weight-bearing movements. But a strong core doesn't stop with the major abdominal muscles: it also means developing healthy and activating muscles in your back, hips, upper torso, and shoulders.

You've probably heard the term “core engagement.” When you're asked to engage your core in a yoga pose, your teacher is asking you to prepare the muscles of your core for movement or balance by contracting them. When you first begin locating and flexing these muscles, it can feel confusing, but over time the sensation of hugging to the midline will become more familiar. Before you do core-focused poses, practice core engagement in mountain pose. From mountain pose, pull your low abdominals in and up. (We described a neutral pelvis earlier in mountain pose; try to find that.) Next, pull your belly button straight back to your spine, as you might do when you're trying to look especially good for the camera. Finally, drop your lowest ribs in and down, as if you were starting a sit-up. If your shoulders round forward, try to find the happy medium between tucking in your ribs and keeping your shoulder blades sliding downward.

Core exercises can be divided into two main categories: stabilization and articulation. Stabilization exercises use your core muscles to brace your pelvis and spine in place, often as your arms or legs move. This requires the muscles all around your core to work together as a team. Articulation, on the



other hand, means moving your spine piece by piece, vertebra by vertebra. Articulation requires both bracing and engagement of the small muscles that control each individual segment of your spine. A well-rounded core program includes both stabilization and articulation exercises.

## ***Be Sweet to Your Knees (and Wrists)***

In any pose that requires placement of hands and knees on your mat, add some padding if there is discomfort in your knees. As we age, we have less padding in our knees, so be kind to yours! You can double up your mat or put a blanket or towel under you ([Figure 5-1](#)). If your wrists need more support, use a blanket or try rolling the front edge of your mat a little. Plant the pad of your palm on the roll ([Figure 5-2](#)) so you decrease the angle at your wrists.



*[Figure 5-1](#). Knees to blanket*



*Figure 5-2. Heels of hands to blanket*

## **Stabilization**

Stabilization involves using your core muscles—your abs, back muscles, breathing diaphragm, and pelvic floor—to hold the relationship of your spine and pelvis steady in space. It feels like a bracing, or a hug of the core muscles inward. To add challenge, seek to hold stabilization while moving one or more limbs.

### **BIRD DOG**

In bird dog ([Figure 5-3](#)) you get the chance to focus on both core engagement and balance at the same time—and this pose is a perfect precursor to plank pose, which we will look at next. Begin on your hands and knees. Find modest core engagement: neutral pelvis, belly toward your spine. Keep stabilizing from the core, and extend your right leg, lifting it about hip height. Check in with your low back; you do not want to feel any sensation of crunching there. If all feels good, extend your left arm forward, reaching up

and ahead, about shoulder height. Balance here, with opposite arm and leg lifted, and take five to ten breaths. Switch sides.



*[Figure 5-3.](#) Bird dog*

## PLANK AND VARIATIONS



*[Figure 5-4](#). Plank*

## Plank

Plank position ([Figure 5-4](#)) trains your core muscles to stabilize your spine and pelvis in space—and challenges you to breathe while you do. These downward-facing stabilization exercises work both front and back, but they put more emphasis on the back. Start from hands and knees. Spread your fingers wide and press firmly through your knuckles and palms. Send one leg, then the other, back as you reach into a long line, head to hips to heels. If you

feel this in your low back, pull your belly in deeper and lift your hips an inch or two. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.



*[Figure 5-5](#). Plank on knees*

## Plank on Knees

To be kinder to your low back while working your core, keep your knees on the floor as you hold plank ([Figure 5-5](#)). They will need to be slightly behind your hips, not directly beneath them. Your hips will be lower than your shoulders. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.

## Elbow Plank



*Figure 5-6. Elbow plank*

Elbow plank ([Figure 5-6](#)) relieves the pressure on your wrists, while helping you develop shoulder stability and offering a continuing challenge for your core. From hands and knees, drop your elbows just under your shoulders, then step your legs back to plank. (Modify with knees down, if you prefer.) Your forearms can stay parallel, or you can clasp your hands together—see what feels best for your shoulders. If you feel this in your low back, hug your belly even deeper and lift your hips a few inches. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.

## UPWARD-FACING STABILIZATION

Like the downward-facing plank exercises, these upward-facing exercises challenge the entire core to work as a team. Upward-facing exercises put special emphasis on the balance between the abdominal muscles and the back muscles.



*[Figure 5-7.](#) Lean back*





*[Figure 5-8](#). Boat*

## Lean Back

In contrast to the roll-down exercise described on pages 59–60, the lean-back pose ([Figure 5-7](#)) requires that you maintain a long spine with no C curve. Start seated with knees bent and soles of the feet on the floor. Take your hands behind your thighs. Lift your spine long and sit very tall. Slowly lean back away from your thighs while keeping your back supported and your chest broad. You probably won't have to go far to feel it! You can keep your hands on your legs or, for more challenge, reach them forward, bend your

elbows with hands in prayer position, or reach your arms overhead. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.

## Boat

Boat pose (*navasana*, [Figure 5-8](#)) maintains the spine of the lean-back pose while adding the legs. Start seated with knees bent and soles of the feet on the floor. Sit tall and lean your torso back, keeping a proud posture through the chest. Try lifting to the balls of your feet, letting your feet float, or lifting your feet to knee height, shins parallel to the floor. Your hands can stay on your legs, come to prayer position, or extend forward or up. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.

## Reverse Table

Reverse table pose ([Figure 5-9](#)) works the back of your body as you keep your abs engaged. Start as you did in lean back and boat pose with knees bent and feet on the ground. Slide your hands behind you, finding a position for your wrists and fingers that suits your shoulders: facing forward, to the sides, or even back. Press into your palms and feet to lift your hips. Keep your knees tracking forward and squeeze your glutes to keep your hips high. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.



*[Figure 5-9](#) . Reverse table*

## Supine Marching

You can also challenge your core to stabilize as you rest on your back. This is a good way to strengthen progressively, as you can find the perfect level of challenge. Start on your back with a ninety-degree bend at the front of your hips. Bend your knees for comfort, which can mean they are also bent to ninety degrees or are straighter ([Figure 5-10](#)). Brace your core so that your

pelvis and spine remain steady. Slowly slide one knee away from your face, lowering your leg toward the floor without arching your low back ([Figure 5-11](#)). This could be a small movement or a big one. For more of a challenge, move both legs together at the same time. Hold for five to ten breaths, or move with your breath: inhale to lower, exhale to lift.



*[Figure 5-10](#) . Supine marching start*



*Figure 5-11 . Supine marching finish*

## **Articulation**

Articulation challenges the smaller muscles in your core to impact the bones of your spine one at a time—to move at the joints between the vertebrae. Depending on your bone density, certain articular movements may not be right for you. Consult Part One of this book and your health-care provider to determine the best choices for your body.



*Figure 5-12. Cat*



*Figure 5-13. Cow*



*[Figure 5-14.](#) Standing cat*





*[Figure 5-15](#). Standing cow*

## CAT AND COW

A classic feature of many warm-up sequences in yoga, cat pose ([Figure 5-12](#)) and cow pose ([Figure 5-13](#)) invite you to move each of your vertebrae

sequentially and to be mindful of connecting this movement with the flow of your breath. Start on hands and knees. As you exhale, press into your palms and round your back like a hissing cat, tucking your tailbone and your chin. As you inhale, tilt your pelvis forward so that your tailbone lifts, and roll through your spine until your chest opens and your chin rises. Alternate back and forth for five to fifteen breaths, or hold each pose for a few breaths.

To bypass the pressure on your hands and knees, you can practice the poses standing. Start with a soft bend in your knees and hands to thighs, rolling through your spine from there (Figures [5-14](#) and [5-15](#)). As you do, try mixing in some other movements, like a light side bend or twist, a few rolls of your rib cage, or bending or straightening one leg or both.

## ROLL DOWN AND ROLL UP

As opposed to the lean back stabilization exercise, in roll down and roll up you'll move slowly through spinal flexion (with a cat back) to challenge your abdominal muscles. Be sure this isn't too much for your spine—see “When Not to Roll” below.

### ***When Not to Roll***

If you have disc concerns, low bone density, or experience pain on any level when you explore rolling down, you can modify this pose by leaning back with a long spine—focusing on stabilization rather than articulation. If you choose to lean back, don't lean back very far: pause after just a few degrees. If this pose still doesn't feel right for you with that change, simply don't do it.

Start seated, knees bent, soles of the feet to the floor. Rest your hands on the backs of your thighs. Rock toward the back of your sitting bones as you round your spine into a C curve. Keep your belly engaged and your breath flowing. Slowly roll back up.

If this feels good, add a challenge by lifting your arms off your legs and rolling down farther before rolling back up ([Figure 5-16](#)). In time you can try

this with straight legs ([Figure 5-17](#)), and you may roll all the way to the floor and back. Don't rush this, and do stay within a range of movement that feels good for your back. Do five to fifteen repetitions.



*[Figure 5-16](#) . Roll down and up with bent knees*



*Figure 5-17*. Roll down and up with straight legs

## **Back-Strengthening and Chest-Releasing Poses**

Strength in the back is especially important as we age. The ability to maintain good posture means more space for the breath and less pressure on the neck and low back. A few judiciously applied yoga poses can mean the difference between encouraging a dowager's hump and maintaining or even earning a comfortably tall bearing.

### **CHEST-RELEASING POSES**

The first order of business is to alleviate tightness across the chest so that the back-strengthening exercises can work through a fuller range of motion. This is happy news: these chest stretches feel great.



*[Figure 5-18](#). Supported fish*

Supported Fish



*[Figure 5-19](#). Sphinx*

You can use a bolster for this pose, or your mat can become the prop in supported fish pose (*matseyasana*, [Figure 5-18](#)). Roll up your mat tightly and place it in a vertical position; then recline with your hips on the floor with the roll supporting your spine. Add a pillow under your head if you like. If this feels too strong in your lower back, slide a block on its lowest height horizontally under your pelvis. Spread your arms to the side in a *T* or *W* shape. Stay for twenty-five breaths or more.



*[Figure 5-20](#). Seal*

## Sphinx and Seal

Sphinx pose and seal pose use your arms to prop you into a backbend and chest stretch. For both poses, light core engagement can offer support for your lower back. For sphinx ([Figure 5-19](#)) start on your belly. Slide your elbows underneath your shoulders, or slightly farther forward, forearms parallel like the Sphinx. Pull your shoulders back and open your chest forward. If you like, bow your head to enjoy a stretch at the back of your neck. Stay for five to fifteen breaths.

Seal pose ([Figure 5-20](#)) takes this action one notch higher. From sphinx, press into your palms and lift your elbows off the floor. Check that your low back feels okay here—if not, return to sphinx. If you like, lift your chin or set your lower jaw in an underbite position to stretch the front of your throat. Stay for five to fifteen breaths.



*Figure 5-21. Puppy*

## Puppy Pose

The gentle backbend of puppy pose (*anahatasana*, [Figure 5-21](#)) uses gravity to stretch your spine. Start on hands and knees. Walk your hands forward while keeping your hips over your knees. Let your chest sink toward the floor as you feel a stretch through your chest and armpits. If this is too intense or pinches in your shoulders, walk it back and drop your forearms to the mat. Stay for five to fifteen breaths.

## EXTENSION EXERCISES

Once you've released tightness in the front of your body, you'll be ready to work the muscles that support the spine.

## Locust





*Figure 5-22. Locust with hands under forehead*



*Figure 5-23. Locust with arms extended*

Locust pose (*salabhasana*) is a backbend that requires working against gravity to move your spine. As such, it's a great way to strengthen your back muscles. Do be sure that the sensation is distributed all along your spine and not centered in your lower back.

Start on your belly, elbows bent, hands stacked under your forehead. Pull your abdominal muscles in as you create length in your lower back—this can feel like a slight tuck in your tailbone. With an inhalation, lift your torso and arms off the floor as well as your legs ([Figure 5-22](#)). Either continue to pulse by exhaling to lower and inhaling to lift, or hold for five to fifteen breaths. For more work, keep your head as is but extend your arms to a *Y* position ([Figure 5-23](#)). Rest and, if you like, repeat.

Extension Jumping Jacks



*Figure 5-25. Swimming*

Once you have the strength to rise to locust pose with your arms extended, you can add a challenge by moving. These jumping jacks help strengthen the muscles that pull your shoulder blades down and back. Start in locust pose with your arms extended. Inhale there. As you exhale, bend your elbows alongside your ribs and point your thumbs toward your shoulders, making a *W* with your arms ([Figure 5-24](#)). Inhale to extend; exhale to repeat. Do five to fifteen breaths, then rest on your belly, in cat pose or in child's pose (see page 82), kneeling and bowing forward with your hips toward your heels.



*[Figure 5-24](#) . Locust with W arms*

## Swimming

Up the ante further by adding contralateral movement. This means that the two sides of your body work in different ways. This is not only good for back strength; it also challenges your brain to keep the neural pathways to your muscles healthy. Slow-motion swimming ([Figure 5-25](#)) fits the bill. Start in locust pose with your arms extended and legs lifted. Lift your left arm and right leg higher, then return them to the starting position and lift your right arm and left leg higher. Continue to alternate slowly (inhaling to lift, exhaling to lower) or quickly. Whatever your speed, keep your belly hugging toward your spine, your low back long, and your breath flowing with minimal rocking through the hips.

If starting this dynamic movement from locust pose feels like too much for your back, you can practice the same swimming movement with your torso

and legs starting on the floor.

## Shoulder Strengthening

Stability around the very mobile shoulder joint is important so that you can keep the shoulder safe and integrated as you lift groceries, grandchildren, or weights, and when you swing a club or racket.



*Figure 5-26. Arm circles up*



*Figure 5-27. Arm circles back*

## Arm Circles

Simply moving your arms through space, no weights needed, can be surprisingly challenging. Start by standing in mountain pose with strong core engagement. Raise your arms to the sides and, keeping your shoulder blades low down your back, draw circles with your arms (Figures [5-26](#) and [5-27](#)). These circles can be big or small, as feels comfortable. Continue for five to twenty-five breaths, then reverse the direction.

## Plank Push-ups

Push-ups are classic for a reason. Done with good alignment, they build strength through the shoulders, upper back, chest, and arms. Varying your arm position will challenge different muscles. There's no need to go really deep with your push-ups—doing shallower push-ups with perfect form is far better than dipping low with sloppy alignment.

Start in a plank position, knees down (though as you progress, you can straighten your legs), hands wide ([Figure 5-28](#)). Inhale to bend your elbows to the sides and lower your chest while keeping your spine long and supported. Exhale and return to the top. Do five to fifteen repetitions, then rest.

Next, slide your elbows closer to your body, hands below your lower ribs ([Figure 5-29](#)). Inhale and bend your elbows straight back as you hold your core supported. Exhale and return to the top. Do five to fifteen repetitions, then rest.



***Figure 5-28** . Knee-down plank push-ups, wide*





***Figure 5-29** . Knee-down plank push-ups, tight*



*[Figure 5-30](#). Seated side bend*



*Figure 5-31. Standing side bend*

## ***Core Challenge versus Back Pain***

In many of these poses, you may feel challenged; core work can be good, hard work. If you are a little shaky, that's just fine. If you can't breathe, that's not so good. Try to find a happy medium: a place where you're confident you're strengthening and equally as confident you're not overdoing it. In general the work of core exercises should happen in the front and side planes of the body. Your back muscles will definitely be working, too, but in poses like plank (page 53), bird dog (page 53), roll down (page 60), and bridge (page 69), you don't want to feel any sensation of crunching or pulling in the lower back. If you do, pause and see if you can engage your core a little more.

## **Side Stretches**

To counterbalance the core work, be sure to include some dedicated side stretches. These release tension in the shoulders and abs (particularly your obliques, which crisscross your waist) and create space through the intercostal muscles between your ribs, which means you can take bigger breaths.

### **Side Bend**

The simplest, most obvious side stretch is a simple side bend. From seated ([Figure 5-30](#)) or standing ([Figure 5-31](#)), raise one arm so that it's reaching toward the other shoulder, or just over the crown of your head. If you're seated, you can lower your bottom arm to the floor; if you're standing, you can go deeper into the bend by gently tugging on your top wrist or elbow with your other hand. Explore the stretch in your shoulder and chest by rolling your top shoulder forward or back, provided your back feels okay. Take five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.

### **Exalted Triangle Pose**



*Figure 5-33. Side angle*

Exalted triangle pose ([Figure 5-32](#)) creates a long line up the front side of your body that anchors the side bend deep in the hip. Start in mountain pose.

Step your left foot forward and your right foot back, hips and right toes turned a bit to the right. Lift your left arm overhead as you lean lightly over the right leg. Your right hand can be on your hip or grazing your thigh. Your head can face down, up, or stay neutral. Take five to fifteen breaths. Change sides.



*Figure 5-32 . Exalted triangle*

Side Angle Pose

Side angle pose (*parsvakonasana*, [Figure 5-33](#)) makes another long line, this time from the heel of your straight leg through the fingers of your extended arm. Start in mountain pose. Step your left foot forward and your right leg back, right toes facing to the right or slightly forward. Lunge your left knee just over your left ankle. Lightly prop your left forearm on your left thigh, palm facing up. Sweep your right arm alongside your ear, thumb back, pinky finger forward. Keep your chest broad. You can look down for stability, forward for a neutral neck, or upward for more of a challenge. Take five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.

## **Glutes Strengthening**

Your glutes are your drivetrain—the big, powerful muscles that propel you forward. The more time you spend sitting, the less you may be able to access this power. Learning to engage your glutes and keep them strong is a critical component to back health, knee health, and remaining vital and active through the years. The glute strength and engagement you can develop with these moves will directly and positively affect your ability to stay balanced, both in these poses and in your daily movements.





*Figure 5-34. Bridge*

## BRIDGE

Bridge pose (*setu bandha sarvangasana*, [Figure 5-34](#)) is taught in both yoga and Pilates, and in the latter it features prominently in strengthening the back of the body. Please be careful as you practice bridge: there should be

minimal pressure in your neck, and you should not turn your head once your hips are lifted, as you could tweak your neck.

Start on your back, knees bent over your ankles, heels hip-distance apart. Frame your hips with your hands, either close in or slightly wider, and press your palms against the floor. Press into your feet and lift your hips off the floor. If this feels good, lift higher while keeping your belly engaged and your low back long. You should definitely feel work in both your glutes and hamstrings. To deepen engagement there, try lifting your toes off the floor and letting the backs of your legs and your seat do more of the work. Then try lifting your heels off the floor and working more in your thighs. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Rest and, if you like, repeat.

## CLAMSHELL

To target your glutes specifically, and especially to work your gluteus medius, do side-lying clamshells. The muscles of the outer hips—gluteus medius is one of them—can easily weaken when underused, and it's easy to underuse these muscles unless you're a hockey player or spend a lot of time line dancing. Clamshell helps to build strength in a muscle that's especially important for hip stability. Start on your left side, knees bent, inner edges of the feet together ([Figure 5-35](#)). Keeping this contact with the inner feet, inhale to open your right knee toward the ceiling ([Figure 5-36](#)). Exhale to clamp it back down to your left knee. Do five to twenty-five repetitions. Switch sides.



*Figure 5-35 . Clamshell start*



*Figure 5-36 . Clamshell finish*

## HANDS AND KNEES GLUTE WORK

To target your glutes holistically, confer stability to one side while the other side moves. These poses from hands and knees will challenge both hips at once. In addition to targeting the glutes, these moves also require support from your core. Find a sense of core engagement before you begin either of

these, and if your low back starts to pull or pinch, take a break and reestablish core engagement.



*[Figure 5-37](#). Donkey kick*

## Donkey Kick

The donkey kick works your glutes and hamstrings while asking your core musculature to hold your pelvis and spine steady. Start on hands and knees, or on forearms and knees if it's better for your wrists. Keeping your right knee bent to around ninety degrees, inhale and lift your right foot high ([Figure 5-37](#)). Exhale to lower. Throughout, keep your pelvis level—don't let it tilt. Do five to twenty-five repetitions. Switch sides.

## Toe Taps

The ability to hold your pelvis and spine steady as your legs move through space is obviously critical, as it's what you do when you walk and run. These toe taps might not look like much, but try them with full core engagement and do several repetitions, and you'll be feeling the importance of core and glute work.

Start from hands and knees. Inhale and extend your left leg behind you around hip height without tipping your pelvis forward or back. Exhale and tap your left toes over to the left without curving your spine ([Figure 5-38](#)). Inhale to lift your leg behind you. Exhale and tap your left toes to the right, past your right foot—again, without angling your spine ([Figure 5-39](#)). Inhale through center and continue. Do five to fifteen two-breath repetitions. Switch sides.



*Figure 5-38 . Tap to open*



*Figure 5-39 . Tap to cross*



# Chapter 6: Keep It Loose: Hip Flexibility

Many practitioners take up yoga with the express goal of increasing flexibility in the hamstrings. And yoga can help with this! Better yet, yoga poses create a balance of flexibility and strength in the hips: front to back and throughout. Flexibility is worthless out of context, or simply for flexibility's sake; it is priceless when paired with strength and control. This chapter focuses on poses that safely stretch and release the muscles of the hips and legs, while also offering poses to help you cultivate a healthy balance between strength and flexibility.

## Front of the Leg: Hip Flexors and Quadriceps

A lifetime of sitting, first in schoolrooms, then in cars and offices, can lead to extreme tightness along the front of the hip, particularly in the hip flexors. This tightness can create a forward tilt to the pelvis that then overstretches the back side, particularly the hamstrings. Easing this stress in the front of the hips will have a direct positive effect on the hamstrings.

### WARRIOR I

Warrior I (*Virabhadrasana I*, [Figure 6-1](#)) is featured in most yoga classes. For many students it is among their least favorite poses. It can be frustrating without the right alignment for your unique body, so be sure to experiment to find optimal alignment. Start in mountain pose. Step your left leg forward and your right leg back, slightly angling your right toes to the right and sealing the outer edge of your right foot down. Lunge your left knee just over your left ankle. Keep your hips squared forward while your heels remain hip distance apart or wider—this should help keep your right knee and low back comfortable. Take your hands to prayer position or lift them overhead. Keep pressing into your right foot while adding a slight backward or cat tilt to your pelvis; feel the release through the front of the right hip. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-1 . Warrior I*

LOW LUNGE

Like Warrior I, a low lunge is a split-leg pose but works deeper into the front of the back leg while challenging the front leg to stay strong and steady. Start in a Warrior I split stance, then come to the ball of your right foot and lower your right knee to the floor. (Add cushioning as needed.) Keep your right toes curled under, or untuck your toes so the top of your foot rests on the mat. Your hands can rest on your left thigh, or reach them overhead for a challenge; for less work, take your hands to the floor or blocks ([Figure 6-2](#)). Keep your hips forward to relieve pressure on your right knee and to stretch the front of the right hip and right quadriceps. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-2 . Low lunge*

## SUPPORTED BRIDGE

While the bridge pose, described in Chapter Five, is wonderful for building strength in your glutes, a supported version of the shape using a yoga

block encourages release through your hip flexors while removing work from the equation. With a block in your hand, start by lifting your hips toward bridge. Slip the block under your pelvis, starting with the lowest height and going higher if it feels right ([Figure 6-3](#)), or adding a second block on top of the first, only when you're ready. Be sure the block is low enough that it's supporting the body and back side of the pelvis, rather than pushing against your low back curve. When you get the placement right, you'll know it—it'll feel wonderful. Keep your knees bent or walk your feet away from your face. Your arms can rest by your sides or stretch overhead. Stay for fifteen to fifty breaths, then take your time coming down.



*[Figure 6-3](#). Supported bridge*

## **Inside of the Leg: Inner Thigh**

The adductor muscles that run down the inner side of each leg are quite long and thin and can harbor a surprising amount of tightness. Finding a healthy balance between strength in your glutes and outer hips and flexibility in your adductors can alleviate stress on your knee and reduce pain there. Do be gentle as you address the inner thigh, as overdoing it can lead to a lingering overstretch injury.

## WARRIOR II

Warrior II (*Virabhadrasana II*, [Figure 6-4](#)) is a side-facing segue from Warrior I. It can be tough on the knees to transition from Warrior I to Warrior II, so instead begin in a wide stance, heels roughly in line. (If you are on a yoga mat, face its long edge.) Rotate on your left heel and point your left toes away from your body (toward the short edge of the mat). Lift onto the ball of your right foot and slide your right heel slightly farther back, internally rotating from your right hip. Your pelvis will be on a slight diagonal. Lunge your left knee over your left ankle and lift your arms to prayer position or reach them over your legs parallel to the floor. Feel your left outer hip muscles helping your left knee balance right over the top of your foot as your left inner thigh muscles lengthen and engage. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-4. Warrior II*

## TRIANGLE

Another classic standing posture, triangle pose (*trikonasana*, [Figure 6-5](#)) continues to build balance between the outer hip and inner thigh. Start from Warrior II. Straighten your left leg and, keeping long in your left ribs, hinge from your left hip to lower your left hand to your left thigh, shin, a chair seat, a block, or the floor. Lift your right arm toward the ceiling. Find a position for your neck that feels comfortable. Looking down will help you balance; looking forward is neutral for the neck; looking up adds a challenge. Stay for five to fifteen breaths with an open chest. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-5 . Triangle*

COBBLER



Cobbler pose (*baddha konasana*, or bound angle pose, [Figure 6-6](#)) is often taught as a seated forward fold, but as such, it puts a lot of strain on the low back. The reclining version of the pose avoids this problem and instead helps to reset the curve of the low back. Start on your back. Bend your knees and drop them to the sides as you swivel the soles of your feet together, pinky toes to the floor. If the sensation is too strong, wedge a block, blanket, or rolled mat between your thighs and the floor. Spread your arms to a *T* or *Y*, or bend your elbows into a diamond shape overhead. Stay for fifteen breaths or more.



*[Figure 6-6](#) . Reclining cobbler*

## REVERSE COBBLER

If cobbler pose doesn't suit your back, or to counterpose after cobbler, try going in the reverse direction. From your back, bend your knees and drop them together as your feet rest at hip-, shoulder-, or mat-distance apart ([Figure 6-7](#)). This gives your adductors a rest while applying light traction that eases pressure on your low back.



*Figure 6-7. Reverse cobbler*

## STRAP STRETCH

An express way to target your inner thigh is to use a strap and gravity as aids. Begin on your back with a strap around the ball of your left foot. Open your left leg to the left while keeping your right hip grounded ([Figure 6-8](#)). This may mean your left leg moves only a few inches, or that it moves considerably farther. Stay for ten to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-8. Inner thigh stretch with strap*

## HAPPY BABY

Happy baby (*ananda balasana*, [Figure 6-9](#)) is an upside-down version of the wide squat, and it commonly appears toward the end of a yoga class. It stretches your adductors while releasing your back and offering a gentle inversion. Start on your back and bend your knees, lifting them toward your armpits as you hold your legs in your hands. The soles of your feet can face forward or up toward the ceiling. Aim to keep your pelvis on the floor—when your seat rolls up, you’re losing the hip stretch and flexing your spine. Stay for five to fifteen breaths.



*[Figure 6-9](#). Happy baby*

## **Back of the Leg: Hamstrings and Glutes**

Practicing the poses described above that target the front of your hip and thigh will probably ease any strain on the back of the thigh, as well, by freeing your pelvis to find a more neutral position. These poses will help further.



*Figure 6-10. Runner's lunge*



*Figure 6-11. Downward-facing dog with a chair*

## **RUNNER'S LUNGE**

The classic runner's lunge uses the extension of your front leg in combination with the action leaning forward to stretch your hamstrings and glutes. It's critical to be gentle here. If you force this stretch, at best the

muscles will lock down and refuse to budge; at worst they will tear. Start in a low lunge stance, right knee down (pad it as needed). Shift your weight over your right knee as you extend your left leg. Your hands can be on your hips, or reach for blocks framing your leg. To stretch the top of your left ankle, point your left foot toward the floor while keeping your left knee slightly bent. To stretch the left calf, roll your left heel back and flex your toes toward your face ([Figure 6-10](#)).

## DOWN DOG AT A CHAIR OR THE WALL



*[Figure 6-14](#). Twisting abductor stretch with strap*

Downward-facing dog (*adho mukha svanasana*) offers a release for the whole back side of the body, but its typical orientation with hands on the floor can be overly demanding for the upper body and the hamstrings. Get to know the shape with a chair, instead. Stand near a chair, table, or countertop, feet hip-distance apart. Take your hands to the chair or table at shoulder distance, hinge from your hips, and walk your feet back and hands down as



you approach an *L* shape ([Figure 6-11](#)). Keep your spine long and your tailbone lifting, which will prevent rounding in the low back. Bend your knees as necessary to accommodate your hamstrings. With time, you can hold your knees straighter as you reach back and up through your tailbone. Stay for five to fifteen breaths.

## HAMSTRINGS AND ABDUCTOR STRAP STRETCHES

Sometimes you need to divide to conquer, and to address one leg at a time. These strap stretches for the hamstrings and outer hip will help.

To target your hamstrings, lie on your back with the strap around the ball of your left foot. Bend your right knee and rest the sole of your right foot on the ground, or straighten your right leg along the floor. With a relatively straight left knee, lift your left leg until you feel a pleasant stretch in the back of your left thigh ([Figure 6-12](#)). Take care to keep the stretch in the belly of the muscle; don't push it toward the back of the knee or the upper hamstrings attachment at the sitting bone. Keep your shoulders and knuckles relaxed. Stay for five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*[Figure 6-12](#). Hamstrings stretch with strap*

To release tension in the outer line of your hamstrings, hook the strap around the ball of your left leg and lift it up, keeping your right foot on the ground with the leg bent or straight. Internally rotate your hip so that your left toes angle to the right. Keeping the left side of your pelvis on the mat, move your right leg a few inches to the left ([Figure 6-13](#)). Stay for five to fifteen breaths. If you like, continue across to a twist, weight in your right hip, left hip lifting and moving toward the right ([Figure 6-14](#)). Stay for another five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*Figure 6-13. Abductor stretch with strap*

## LEGS TO A CHAIR OR THE WALL

As you noticed in the previous stretches with the strap, lifting your feet up releases the back of your legs while gently inverting the limbs. Done right, inversions calm the nervous system and encourage interstitial fluids to recirculate, which can reduce swelling in the lower leg. For this stretch, use a chair or a wall to prop your heels up. If you're using a chair (a sofa or a coffee table will work, too), scoot your hips as close under your knees as feels comfortable while allowing a neutral alignment of your back and neck ([Figure 6-15](#)). This means your low back isn't forced to the floor but instead curves lightly away from it, and your neck is relaxed, not arched, with your nose higher than your chin. A pillow can help here.



***Figure 6-15** . Legs to chair*

If your hamstrings accommodate taking legs up the wall pose (*viparita karani*), prop your heels against a wall or a closed and locked door. Scoot your hips as close to the baseboard as feels good. Again, a pillow can help your neck relax. Spread your arms to a *V*, *T*, or *W* shape to stretch your chest as your glutes and hamstrings relax.

## CHILD'S POSE

Child's pose (*balasana*, [Figure 6-16](#)) stretches the back, glutes, quadriceps, and shins and can feel sweetly grounding and relaxing. Start from hands and knees. Shift your hips back over your heels as far as feels good. If your knees are iffy, set a pillow between your calves and thighs. Rest on the tops of your feet. If your ankles won't extend this way, keep your toes curled under or slide a blanket under your shins. Your arms can be extended overhead or can rest by your hips. Stay for five to fifteen breaths or more.



*[Figure 6-16](#) . Child's pose*

## Outer Hip: Glutes and Deep Rotators

The gluteal muscles form your rear end and outer hip, and beneath them lie the deep hip rotators. In Chapter Five you learned exercises to engage these muscles. Here are ways to stretch them.

## SUPINE FIGURE FOUR

Lie on your back with your left knee bent. Cross your right ankle over your left thigh. Depending on your anatomy, you might find the best stretch by rolling your right knee away from your face or, conversely, bringing it toward your chest. For more of a stretch, lift this figure-four configuration in toward your chest, reaching for your left thigh ([Figure 6-17](#)). Keep your shoulders and neck relaxed and your tailbone low to the ground. Hold for five to fifteen breaths. Switch sides.



*[Figure 6-17](#). Supine figure four*

## SUPINE TWIST

A supine (resting on your back) twist can feel wonderful with the knees close together, separate, or crossed—or try several different expressions in a

single session. Start on your back, knees bent, arms spread. Drop both knees to the right while keeping your left shoulder low. Stay here, or experiment: add a prop between your right leg and the floor; stack your knees more tightly, or let them slide apart; cross your left knee over your right, tightly or loosely ([Figure 6-18](#)); or slip your right shin over your left. Stay for ten to fifteen breaths or more in each variation.



*[Figure 6-18](#) . Supine twist*

## PRONE TWIST



*[Figure 6-19](#). Prone twist start*





*[Figure 6-20](#). Prone twist finish*

In a prone twist, your belly faces down, so gravity affects the experience differently than in other poses. Start by sitting on your left hip, knees bent and loosely stacked, upper torso twisted to the left. Press your right hand into the floor beneath your right shoulder and near your thighs, and press your left hand under your left shoulder ([Figure 6-19](#)). Keep this length and the twist as you look over your left shoulder. Stay here or lower toward the floor,

arriving on forearms ([Figure 6-20](#)) or lowering your entire chest toward your mat.

## Final Relaxation

To complete your practice, whether short or long, take at least ten breaths of relaxation. If time is tight, this might mean standing in an easy mountain pose and focusing on your breath. If you have one or more minutes, rest in corpse pose or some other favorite reclining position, like a supported backbend. This quiet time brings closure—like dessert after a meal.

### SAVASANA



*[Figure 6-21](#). Savasana*

For corpse pose (*savasana*, [Figure 6-21](#)), lie on your back—on your mat or your bed. Arrange your arms and legs comfortably. To find comfort in your legs, try resting your heels hip- or shoulder-distance apart. If your lower back complains, or for a more deluxe experience, rest a rolled-up blanket or towel underneath your knees. To find comfort in your arms and across your chest, try spreading your arms in an inverted *V*, thumbs wide, palms up. Or bend your elbows and place your hands on your belly or chest to stay

connected to your breath. Keep your spine long, your neck relaxed, and your breath flowing comfortably. Stay for two to ten minutes.

# **PART III: PUTTING IT TOGETHER**

# Chapter 7: Yoga in Your Day

Drawing on the poses outlined in Part Two, in this section we introduce short sequences to energize you in the morning, challenge you through the day, and help you unwind in the evening. You'll find that we've made suggestions about the purpose of each sequence, so you can more easily choose what you need when you need it. These sequences are good for many purposes, though, so explore and try them all. On a day where you have more time, you can string a few of them together.

## Intention and Goals

In order to get the most from your practice, be as clear as possible about it. We like to think of this in both objective and subjective ways. Begin by considering why you chose your practice for the day—what brings you onto your mat?—and how much time you have to practice. Objectively, set a goal for your practice. It could be to follow along with the sequence as listed, to hold each pose for ten or fifteen breaths, to practice for a set amount of time (using a timer), or any other objectively measurable goal to help keep you on track. Combine that with an intention for your practice. Intention is more subjective and personal. Your intention could be, “I’ll find joy in each breath,” or “I’ll see where I can let go more.” Your objective goal combined with your subjective intention can make your practice deeply fulfilling.

## Order and Transitions

Each sequence lists poses in a logical order—from warm-up to more challenging poses to the final releasing poses. While we think this progression is generally best, it's okay if you do the poses “out of order,” skip some, or substitute in others. There's a thoughtful logic to these sequences, but nothing bad will happen if you make your own changes! And something good will happen when you make changes in service to your intention and goals for the practice.

Some of the sequences offered here keep you low to the ground, some of them are mostly standing sequences, and some mix seated, supine, prone, and standing poses. For the latter, use wise transitions that feel safe for you, and

take your time moving from one position to the other. Transitions between poses are a chance to take a round of breath, wiggle and squirm, roll your shoulders, or rock your hips from side to side. This spontaneous free-flowing movement can add a lot to your practice! Transitions between poses can also be restful: feel free to add in rests in child's pose or a few breaths standing in mountain to reset. You might also use the moments in transitions to reconnect to a mantra or the intention that you brought into your practice.

## **Pacing and Breath**

The glory of home practice is getting to hold poses to the Goldilocks standard—whatever is just right for you. You'll find suggestions in the full pose descriptions in Part Two, but as a rule of thumb, hold standing poses for five to fifteen breaths, core poses until you feel a challenge that's exciting but not exhausting, and relaxing floor poses for fifteen to twenty-five breaths. Sometimes flow (*vinyasa*) fits the bill, and you'll enjoy moving more fluidly between one pose and the next, moving into and out of a pose from a neutral position (i.e., mountain pose to a lunge), or stringing together three poses or more to make a single flow.

Your breath will be your best gauge of the right pace and effort. Provided your nose is clear, you should be able to continue a nasal breath throughout, at a comfortably slow rate. If your breath quickens or you have to open your mouth to gasp for air, slow down. If you're getting distracted and find it hard to focus on your breath, try speeding up.

## **Quiet Time**

A meditation practice can stand on its own, or it can be added to your yoga practice. A good time for meditation might be before you begin your yoga asana practice or after you have completed your sequence but before you take rest in corpse pose. You don't have to add meditation, though, to these sequences. After each sequence, give yourself at least a few minutes for rest in corpse pose—that's the only part of each sequence we consider to be mandatory!

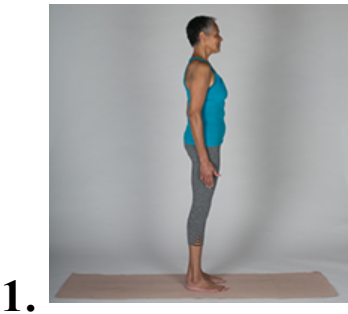
## **Get Going: A Few Easy Sequences to Warm Up**

These stand-alone warm-up sequences take just a few moments, so if you only have time for a very short yoga practice, any of these would suffice.

You'll also see that for most of the sequences that follow, we suggest beginning with one of these warm-ups. None of these take many props; for the standing sequence offered here you don't even need a mat. These are sequences you can quickly do anywhere—at home, in your office, or at the airport.

### STANDING WARM-UP

The standing warm-up sequence moves you through the six different positions of the spine, through gentle forward folding, extension (backbending), side bending, and twisting. This is an excellent sequence to do daily, and it's also a good preparatory sequence for more yoga or for other movement activities. The best part about this sequence is that you don't need any props (or a mat), and you can also do this sequence in shoes and street clothes. Inhale to standing cow and exhale to standing cat, a synchronization you'll often find in yoga class, and hold each of these to your heart's content.



*Mountain (page 37)*



*Tall mountain (page 38)*



*Standing cat (page 58)*



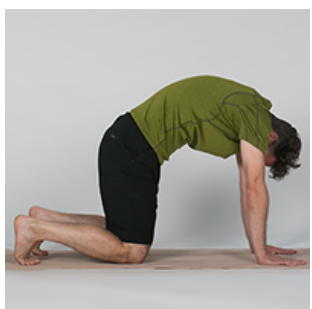
*Standing cow  
(page 58)*

*Chair twist (page  
40)*

*Standing side bend  
(page 67)*

## TABLE WARM-UP

The table warm-up is much like the standing warm-up in that it prepares you for more movement. You do the majority of this on hands and knees or seated, so having a mat out is a good idea. This sequence moves you through the different movements of your spine, so it can work as a complete short practice on its own, too, if you're short on time. You can connect movement and breath by inhaling to cow and exhaling to cat; inhaling to extend your leg behind you and exhaling to tap it to either side makes sense, too. But you are the best authority on how your own breath can support your movements. Asymmetrical poses should be done on both sides.



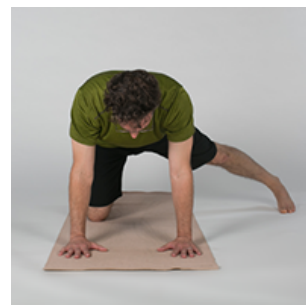
1.

*Cat (page 58)*



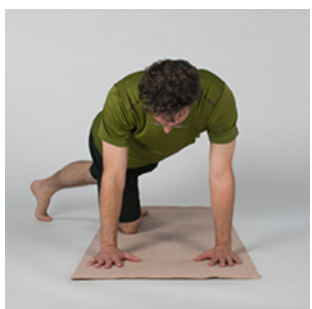
2.

*Cow (page 58)*



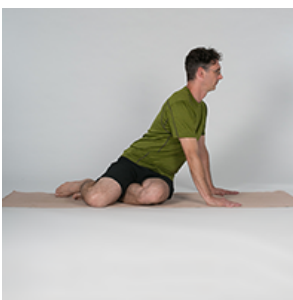
3.

*Tap to open (page  
72)*



4.

*Tap to cross (page  
72)*



5.

*Prone twist (page  
84)*



6.

*Seated side bend  
(page 67)*



## SEATED AND RECLINING WARM-UP

This is the gentlest of the warm-ups that we offer. In this sequence you will be holding poses that align with the movements of the spine. For each of these you will find relaxing, sweet stretches that encourage your body to move into a new shape with support. This is a wonderful stand-alone sequence to do in the evening before bed. You can use simple props, including a blanket, pillow, or cushion—and remember to switch sides for the last two poses.



*Supported fish  
(page 61)*



*Supported bridge  
(page 74)*



*Supine twist  
(page 83)*



*Seated side bend  
(page 67)*

## Preparing for Action: Specific Sequences to Get You Ready

The sequences here have specific purposes and are designed to be practiced in advance of specific events. Every pose here is a suggestion, so if something doesn't feel so good or is contraindicated for your body, skip it or substitute a pose that works better for you. In Part Two we offered more than one version of some poses (plank and plank with knees down, for example). In some of the sequences below we have indicated a specific version of the pose. In other cases we've simply indicated a general pose (i.e., "plank"), so you can choose the version best for you. Also, don't forget to work both sides.

### BEFORE A TENNIS MATCH OR A GOLF GAME

In tennis and golf you rotate your upper body to swing your club or racket. While tennis is significantly faster moving than golf, in both sports you want to develop an openness in your inner and outer thighs and shoulders, and flexibility in your spine. This sequence includes some balance, too, to prepare you for your A game.

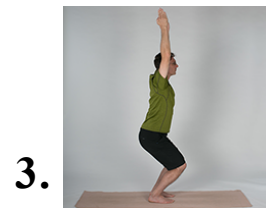
Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



*Arm circles (page 65)*



*Standing cow (page 58)*



*Chair (page 39)*

4.

5.

6.



*Warrior II (page 75)*



*Tree (page 45)*



*Standing star (page 45)*



**7.**

*Leg swings across the midline (page 47)*



**8A.**

*Lean back (page 56)*



**8B.**

*Alternative: Boat (page 56)*

**9.**

**10.**





*Reclining cobbler (page 77)*

*Supine twist (page 83)*

### BEFORE A HIKE, JOG, OR WALK

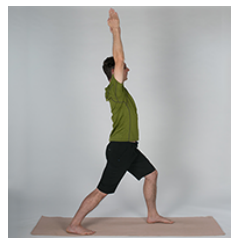
Hiking, jogging, and walking are repetitive-motion activities that require support from your core and your glutes. This sequence opens your hips to prepare your legs for faster movement in poses like Warrior II and supine figure four, and it builds core engagement with elbow plank.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



1.

*Downward-facing dog with a chair (page 80)*



2.

*Warrior I (page 73)*



3.

*Warrior II (page 75)*

4.

5.

6.



*Triangle (page 76)*



*Side angle  
pose (page  
68)*



*Tree (page  
45)*



**7.**

*Warrior III (page 46)*



**8.**

*Elbow plank  
(page 54)*



**9.**

*Sphinx  
(page 61)*

**10.**



**11.**



*Supine figure four (page 83)*

*Supine twist (page 83)*

## BEFORE HIGH-INTENSITY ACTIVITY

Warm up for a race, tough workout, or chasing your dogs down a trail with this standing sequence, which needs no mat. (You can do it at the start line!) Begin by pulsing in and out of the standing balance poses, which will help you warm up into them. Use an exhalation to move into the pose, and an inhalation to come out of it. Do this five to ten times, then hold each for three to five breaths.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



*Chair (page 39)*



*Crane with leg extended (page 44)*



*Alternative:  
Crane with knee bent (page 44)*



*Dancer (page 47)*



*Low eagle (page 49)*



*Alternative:  
Easy eagle*



*Alternative:  
Figure four  
(page 49)*



*Arm circles  
(page 65)*

## BEFORE A WEEKEND WITH GRANDCHILDREN

You will be moving quickly, we bet, if you spend a weekend chasing grandchildren! It may feel like a high-intensity activity all its own. This sequence helps you build hip flexibility and glute strength. You'll also find poses that build core strength and spinal stability, like lean back and bird dog. This would be a good sequence to do a few times in the week before your family comes to visit.

Start with the table warm-up (see page 92).



*Bird dog (page  
53)*



*Donkey kicks (page  
71)*



*Puppy (page  
62)*

4.



*Child's pose  
(page 82)*

5.



*Ball squat (page  
41)*

6.



*Lean back  
(page 56)*

7.



*Bridge (page 69)*

8.



*Supported bridge  
(page 74)*

9.



*Supine twist  
(page 83)*

10.



*Happy baby (page  
79)*

**BEFORE A DAY DOING YARD WORK OR GARDENING**



Gardening and caring for the yard can be hard work. To prepare for a day of these activities, you will want to feel open in your legs and hips. Poses like low lunge and dancer offer release for your hip flexors and your quads, while poses like runner's lunge and exalted triangle give your hamstrings a chance to elongate. This sequence works your inner and outer hips, too, with poses like standing star and leg swings across the midline. You'll feel warmed up and ready to bend (from the knees!) to pull weeds or plant veggies.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



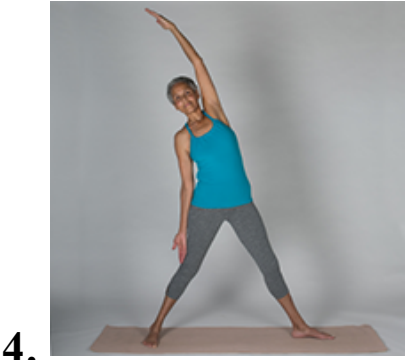
*Arm circles (page 65)*



*Standing cow (page 58)*



*Warrior II (page 75)*



*Exalted triangle (page 68)*



*Leg swings across the midline (page 47)*



*Standing star (page 45)*

7.



*Dancer (page 47)*

8.



*Low lunge (page 74)*

9.



*Runner's lunge (page 80)*

10.



*Knee-down plank push-ups (tight) (page 66)*

11.



*Locust with hands under forehead (page 62)*

12.



*Locust with W arms (page 64)*

13.



*Supported fish (page  
61)*

**BEFORE A LONG DRIVE OR FLIGHT**

When you know you'll be sitting for a long period of time, it's useful to engage in movement and activity in advance. You don't want to do anything too challenging: it's no fun to feel deeply sore when you can't stretch! But light activity prior to sitting will keep you from getting too stiff from a flight or car trip. This sequence offers you a chance to open and stretch your chest and hips, and find core engagement in challenging poses.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



*Warrior I (page  
73)*



*Warrior II  
(page 75)*



*Triangle (page 67)*



*Side angle pose  
(page 68)*



*Tree (page 45)*



*Low eagle (page  
49)*

7.



*Wide squat  
(page 41)*

8.



*Reverse table  
(page 57)*

9.



*Boat (page 56)*

10.



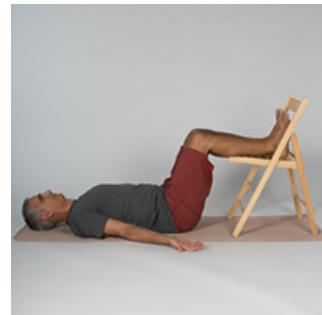
*Roll down (page  
59)*

11.



*Bridge (page  
69)*

12.



*Legs to chair/up  
the wall (page 82)*

## BEFORE A BUSY WEEKEND VISITING WITH EXTENDED FAMILY OR FRIENDS

Spending time with family and friends can involve a lot of laughter and great conversations. You might spend a lot of time engaged in social activity with less time for quiet and introspection. This sequence involves grounding poses, like goddess and chair, to prepare you for the connection and conversation of your visit. It also ends with a strap sequence for your legs. Take plenty of time doing those last three poses. You might even want to add a few minutes in seated meditation before savasana.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).

1.

2.

3.



*Chair (page 39)*



*Downward-facing dog with a chair/against the wall (page 80)*



*Plank on knees (page 54)*



**4.**

*Child's pose (page 82)*



**5A.**

*Crane with leg extended (page 44)*



**5B.**

*Alternative: Crane with knee bent (page 44)*



**6.**

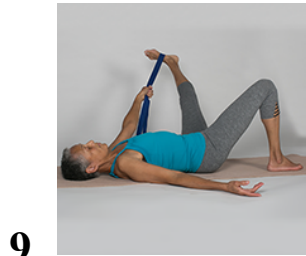


**7.**



**8.**

*Goddess (page 43)*



*Roll down (page 59)*



*Supine marching (page 57)*



*Inner thigh stretch with strap (page 78)*



*Hamstrings stretch with strap (page 81)*

*Abductor stretch with strap (page 81)*

*Reverse cobbler (page 78)*

## BEFORE A DAY OF HOLIDAY COOKING, BAKING, AND EATING

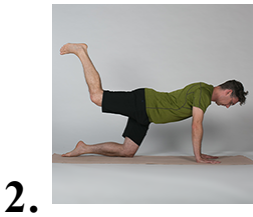
If you've ever spent a day cooking for a big group, you know that kitchen duty is hard work: stirring things and lifting heavy pots and pans can be physically taxing, and the mental work of measuring and planning can be

exhausting. A big day of eating, too, can be wonderfully joyful, but it can also make you feel sluggish. This sequence offers chest-stretching poses to keep your posture strong throughout the day, twists to encourage digestion, and lots of poses and movements that challenge the glutes and core to build stamina. For a long day in front of the oven, you'll need it!

Start with the table warm-up (see page 92).



*Bird dog (page 53)*



*Donkey kick (page 71)*



*Puppy (page 62)*



*Wide squat with twist (page 42)*



*Seal (page 61)*



*Knee-down plank push-ups (wide) (page 66)*

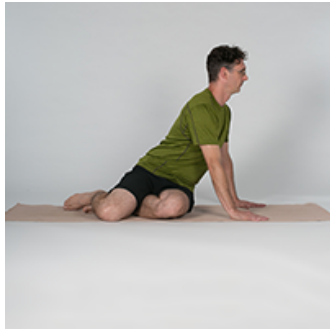




*Locust with arms extended (page 62)*



*Clamshell (page 70)*



**10.**

*Prone twist (page 84)*



**11.**

*Supported fish (page 61)*



**12.**

*Supine twist (page 83)*

## BEFORE AN EMOTIONAL DAY [WEDDING, FUNERAL, BIG LIFE EVENT]

Life has inevitable ups and downs. Whether you are preparing for a happy day or a heart-wrenching one, you'll want to be prepared and present. This sequence gives you plenty of chance to rest and restore: it begins with the seated and reclining warm-up and ends with legs to a chair. While it may look like a short sequence, it could take a little longer than some of the other sequences, since you'll want to go slowly with care. And since ample time in corpse pose is especially necessary before an important, emotion-filled day, give yourself a little extra time for the practice.

Start with the seated and reclining warm-up (see page 92).



1.



*Standing cat  
(page 58)*

2.



*Standing cow (page  
58)*

3.



*Downward-facing  
dog with a chair  
(page 80)*

4.



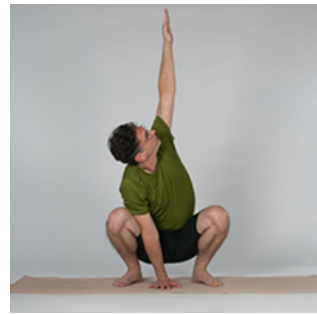
*Goddess  
(page 43)*

5.



*Wide squat (page 41)*

6.



*Wide squat with  
twist (page 42)*

7.



*Elbow plank  
(page 54)*

8.



*Locust with hands  
under forehead*

9.



*Swimming (page  
64)*

(page 62)



*Child's pose  
(page 82)*



*Legs to chair/up the  
wall (page 82)*

## **Waking (Back) Up**

In this section, you'll find a nice go-to daily practice that we feel is balanced and covers the different areas of the body (especially when you switch sides for some of these poses). There are also sequences here for restarting your practice. There will be times when your practice will go dormant. That period of dormancy will (hopefully) be short: a long, busy weekend that gives you no spare time, a vacation where your yoga practice involves corpse pose on a lounge chair (with a glass of sangria), or an injury that sidelines you for a week or so. If you must take a longer reprieve than that, begin again with a practice of just warm-ups for a little while—or warm-ups and one or two beloved poses. Give yourself time to get stronger and agile again. It's better to err on the side of too little than too much, too soon.

### **SIMPLE DAILY PRACTICE**

This is a simple sequence you can practice any time of day, though a daily morning practice is our favorite. It sets the tone for the rest of your waking hours, and you go into all personal interactions from a place of mindful breathing, introspection, and peacefulness. The best days begin with a little yoga! You might also add in some meditation if you plan to make this your everyday sequence.

Start with the table warm-up (see page 92).



*Bird dog (page 53)*



*Donkey kick (page 71)*



*Triangle (page 67)*



*Exalted triangle (page 68)*



*Side angle (page 68)*



*Chair (page 39)*



7B.



*Tree (page 45)*



*Alternative: Figure four (page 49)*



*Dancer (page 47)*



*Warrior III (page 46)*



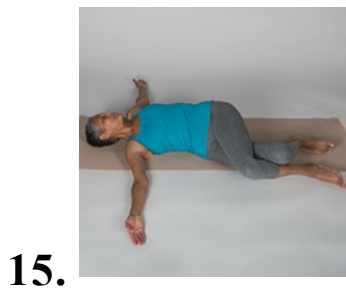
*Wide squat with twist (page 42)*



*Roll down (page 59)*



*Elbow plank (page 54)*



*Locust with arms extended (page 62)*

*Child's pose (page 82)*

*Supine twist*  
(page 83)

**AFTER A LOT OF SITTING**

Long days of sitting are inevitable in our modern world. You might be traveling or working hard on a project that involves a lot of desk time. If sitting often is a required part of your work, we humbly suggest you invest in a standing desk. But regardless of how diligent you are in avoiding too much sitting, you're probably going to encounter it at some point. This sequence gives you the opportunity to fire up the muscles in your glutes and hips (which relax a little *too* much with hours of sitting). There's also a focus on stretching the hip flexors and the front plane of the body—areas that can shorten and tighten when we spend a lot of time in a sedentary and seated position.

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



*Arm circles*  
(page 65)



*Goddess* (page 43)



*Standing star*  
(page 45)



*Low lunge (page 74)*



*Runner's lunge (page 80)*



*Reverse table (page 57)*



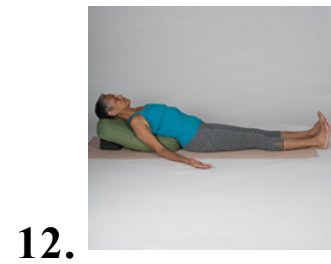
*Locust with arms extended (page 62)*



*Knee-down plank push-ups (tight) (page 66)*



*Knee-down plank push-ups (wide) (page 66)*



*Clamshell (page 70)*

*Supported bridge (page 74)*

*Supported fish (page 61)*

## AFTER A VACATION

Getting reinvigorated after a restful, relaxing time can be especially challenging. This sequence helps you jump back into the flow of movement, offering strength-building poses like lunges and plank. After the deep, muscle-challenging work here, take ample time to rest in a supine twist and then corpse pose. You'll feel ready to recommit to your practice after this!

Start with the standing warm-up (see page 91).



*Chair (page 39)*



*Warrior I  
(page 73)*



*Warrior  
III (page  
46)*



*Warrior II (page 75)*



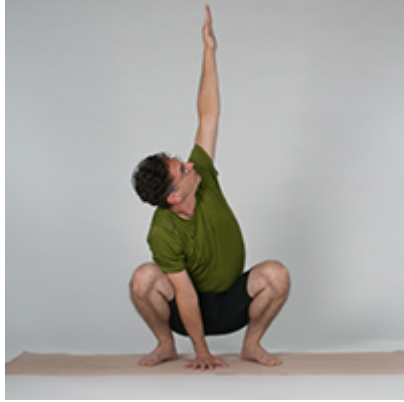
*Triangle  
(page 67)*



*Exalted  
triangle  
(page 68)*

7.





*Wide squat with twist  
(page 42)*

*Plank (page  
53)*

*Sphinx  
(page 61)*



**10.**

*Locust with hands under  
forehead (page 62)*



**11.**

*Seated side  
bend (page  
67)*



**12.**

*Prone  
twist (page  
84)*



**13.**



**14.**



*Supine marching (page  
57)*

*Supine twist  
(page 83)*

## Recovery

### AFTER A WORKOUT

This is a useful sequence to do after an especially spicy workout, whether that's at the gym, with a trainer, on a running track, or after a hike. If you're already feeling a little sore (or you fully expect to feel sore soon!), this is a practice that offers kind stretches and gentle movement to help you recover.

Start with the table warm-up (see page 92).



*Child's pose (page  
82)*



*Inner thigh stretch  
with strap (page  
78)*



*Hamstrings  
stretch with  
strap (page 81)*



*Abductor stretch*



*Supported bridge*



*Supported fish*

*with strap (page 81)*

*(page 74)*

*(page 61)*

## ON A REST DAY FROM OTHER MOVEMENT PRACTICES

If your level of activity is such that you have workout days and rest days, this is a great sequence for your rest days. There's a little challenge, a lot of sweet stretches, and balance across the body. This is a practice that prepares you for more movement on another day.

Start with the seated and reclining warm-up (see page 92).



*Cow (page 58)*



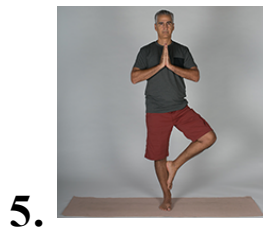
*Cat (page 58)*



*Downward-facing dog with a chair (page 80)*



*Plank (page 53)*



*Tree (page 45)*



*Low eagle (page 49)*

7.



*Figure four  
(page 49)*

8A.



*Sphinx (page  
61)*

8B.



*Alternative: Seal  
(page 61)*

9.



*Swimming  
(page 64)*

10.



*Child's pose  
(page 82)*

11.



*Supported squat  
(page 42)*

12.



*Supine figure  
four (page 83)*

13.






*Supine twist  
(page 83)*

AFTER A LONG DAY

Sometimes it's hard to do anything but park yourself in a cushy chair with your favorite book and a cup of tea. When you've had a physically, emotionally, or mentally taxing day and you don't want to do anything at all, do this. It's simple, easy, and relaxing. Maintaining a routine of yoga has value, but on the days that you just can't make yourself do a lunge pose, this is the perfect sequence.

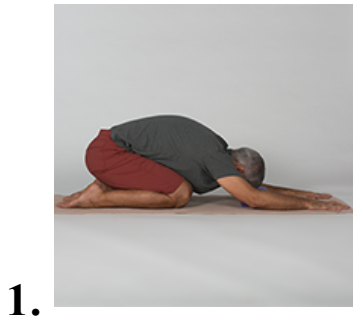
Start with the seated and reclining warm-up (see page 92).

- 1.   
*Prone twist (page 84)*
- 2.   
*Sphinx (page 61)*
- 3.   
*Supine figure four (page 83)*
- 4.   
*Happy baby (page 79)*
- 5.   
*Legs to chair/up the wall (page 82)*

**AFTER OVERDOING IT**

As we get older, there are repeated opportunities to find, learn, and relearn safe boundaries for movement and activity. You'll probably have days, though, where you do a little too much. When you're encountering deep exhaustion, uncomfortable soreness, or physical fatigue, this is a short, helpful sequence to do. And give yourself an extra-long savasana after this!

Start with the table warm-up (see page 92).



*Child's pose (page 82)*



*Supported bridge (page 74)*



*Happy baby (page 79)*



*Supine twist (page 83)*

## AFTER AN EMOTIONAL DAY

When you are emotionally devastated, movement, breath, and stillness can help you return to your body and to the present. This is the sequence to practice after a day of tears. If even this sequence feels impossible to commit to, another good option is to practice the seated and reclining warm-up and

then a long savasana. That's essentially a restorative yoga practice, and when you're in distress, peace, relaxation, and presence can help you begin to find equanimity. If you find yourself feeling big emotions as you move—or shedding more tears in practice—don't be surprised. Especially draining days may cause you to store tension in your shoulders, neck, jaw, or hips. As you relax these spaces in your body after hours of holding, emotion might flood out.

Start with the seated and reclining warm-up (see page 92).



*Sphinx (page 61)*



*Child's pose (page 82)*



*Supported squat (page 42)*



*Reclining cobbler (page 77)*



*Reverse cobbler (page 78)*



*Happy baby (page 79)*

# Chapter 8: Yoga through the Days

## How Often Should I Do Yoga?

We think you should do yoga every day. If you feel intimidated by that notion, don't. When we say "do yoga every day" we mean do *some* yoga every day, not necessarily an hour of yoga. If you have the time and motivation, an hour of yoga is great. If that doesn't fit your life or your personality, find what does. Many of the sequences we offer in Chapter Seven will take you as little as ten minutes, and you can do the standing warm-up we offer without even getting out your mat. Ten minutes of yoga may not seem like much, but it can make a difference in the way your body feels, in your balancing abilities, your sense of presence and mindfulness, and the demeanor you bring to your day.

If daily yoga doesn't seem likely, try adding yoga in twice a week. If you make it a twice-a-week habit, your practices can be a little longer: you might string together three or four of the sequences we offer in Chapter Seven or attend two sixty- to ninety-minute classes a few days apart. The benefit of yoga twice a week is that you create consistency but still have room for variety. If you practice twice a week, one session could focus on building strength, and the other on flexibility, for instance. Or one of your practices could be more challenging, the other more relaxing. With a practice that happens twice a week, you build a habit that you can harness to your body's needs on your given practice days.

Finally, if twice a week seems like more than you can slot in, aim for a special time weekly for your practice. You could make it a ritual to start your week, waking up early on Monday for a morning practice. You could close each week with some time on your mat, and make Friday evenings a time for quiet, reflective movement. If you don't feel ready to start a weekly home practice, you could find a class you love and make sure to attend it with regularity. You could also find online classes (including those we offer) and set aside time weekly to follow along.

The bottom line is that while more yoga is usually better, some yoga is always better than none. Even taking a few breaths in cat-cow poses counts

as a yoga practice!

## **What's the Right Mix of Classes?**

Generally speaking, you want to make sure your movement practice offers you opportunities to stretch and release with enough challenge that you continue to build strength. We think of yoga as a complement to an already active life. If your life off the mat contains trips to the gym and long hikes or bike rides, you might enjoy a gentle yoga practice with longer time in passive stretches. If you have a few days of sitting or a week of less movement, a class that has more vigor, flow, and challenge would be best. The right mix of classes is whatever serves what you're doing when you're *not* doing yoga.

## **When Do I Know I Need a Private Lesson?**

Private lessons offer a wonderful way to customize your yoga practice. With your teacher's full attention, you'll be able to ask questions, offer feedback, and receive personalized alignment instructions and suggestions for next steps.

We suggest you schedule a private lesson after first trying several weeks of group classes or a series designed for beginners. This will give you baseline knowledge—a vocabulary, as it were—that will make the private lesson much more useful. (There's no sense in hiring a language tutor if you don't speak a single word of the language!) It will also give you a clear sense of what your questions are, and where points of confusion lie.

To get the most out of your private lesson, be clear on what you would like to learn. Sometimes we give private lessons to students with specific physical limitations, and we work together to find alternatives so they can still practice in group classes. Sometimes we help students develop sequences for their home practice. Sometimes we work toward a particular pose, or strength or flexibility in a certain area. What you would like to learn is up to you, but being very clear about it from the moment you book your lesson will ensure you get the most out of the experience.

Perhaps your favorite teacher offers private lessons. If not, contact your local yoga studio and ask for a recommendation. Be as descriptive as you can about your wants and needs, and be sure to share both your goals for the lesson and any physical concerns. At our studios we have a range of private



teachers with varied skill sets, and it's always gratifying to act as matchmaker, finding the right fit between teacher and student.

Pricing for private lessons depends on the local market and the experience of the teacher. In general, expect to pay at least \$60 and up to \$200 in large metropolitan areas for a highly qualified private yoga teacher.

Then take what you learn back into your home practice.

## **What's the Right Amount of Home Practice?**

When you're new to yoga, doing it on your own outside of a studio can feel like you're trying to choreograph your own dance routine and you've never danced before; indeed, choosing poses and sequencing them is a lot like choreography. If this seems daunting, remember that you can start with yoga sequences offered in this book or that you find elsewhere.

Both of us include an instruction in our classes that sounds something like this, "From here, explore. Wiggle around. What do you want to move or stretch? Take ten to thirty breaths to find what feels good." We include this free-form option because we've found in our own yoga practice that often the most beneficial yoga arises from organic, unstructured movement. We want students in our classes to have the opportunity to practice listening to their bodies and finding pathways of movement that feel particularly helpful to them. For that same reason, home practice is important, whether you're brand new to yoga or you've practiced it for years. Spending time just listening to your body and moving it in ways that feel right for you is an important part of getting to know your body. And the better you know your body—what feels best, what feels challenging, what feels safe and unsafe—the less likely you are to get injured.

Try out a variety of sequences offered in Chapter Seven as a way into your home practice. Over time you'll intuitively create your own sequences from the moves and poses you find here in this book, in the classes you attend, and in the videos you watch.

Most importantly, make sure you develop your own personalized home practice. Taking the time to tailor your movement practice to your body—rather than simply following the cues of an instructor who may not be familiar with the needs and nuances of your body—will produce the most beneficial results.

# **PART IV: PLAYING THE LONG GAME**

## Chapter 9: Yoga through the Decades

As the years pass and aging brings changes, you can use yoga as a way to maintain a movement practice and for what may feel harder: accepting that range of motion and physical ability inevitably decline.

As aging progresses, yoga is invaluable. Continuing to move—at any level—keeps you physically healthy. A more vigorous yoga practice can qualify as exercise all on its own, or you might use yoga (as we most often do) as an injury-preventing complement to the other exercise you do. Your yoga practice and other movement practices will change as you age. That is indisputable. But doing less does not mean doing nothing. And the old adage holds: it's quality, not quantity. What matters most is the attitude, quality of breath, and intention you bring to the mat.

Since yoga is a movement practice *and* a mind-set, you can use the principles we explain here even if you are hospitalized, confined to sitting as you recover from an injury or illness, or unable to travel to a yoga class. This chapter offers easy adaptations for your body and a fresh perspective on how you can mentally approach aging to help you continue your practice regardless of circumstance.

### Modifying Relative to Gravity

A pose's intensity will change depending on its relationship to gravity. Consider that a handstand is simply tall mountain pose upside down! If doing a pose with your hands on the floor is uncomfortable, try practicing the pose on your back. Likewise, several standing poses have corresponding reclining versions.

If your knees feel challenged in deep squat poses, you can do those poses on your back: the squat becomes happy baby pose. You get the benefit of an inner thigh stretch, but your knees stay pain-free, since your legs don't have to support you.

If your upper body, wrists, elbows, or shoulders are healing from injury, poses like downward-facing dog and plank can be done at the wall. You'll

still get to experience the range of motion and stretch offered by the pose, but your upper body doesn't have to work as hard to hold up your weight.

If a pose feels unavailable, consider ways you could modify it, move it in space, or invert it. Your yoga practice is always an exploration; this is just another way you get to think creatively and make sure your practice is appropriate for you.

Finally, remember, too, that there's no pose that defines yoga. Yoga is movement and breath, mindfulness and presence. A time might arrive when a pose no longer feels good or is no longer safe or comfortable, and there aren't any similar alternatives. When that happens you get to practice another important lesson from yoga: letting go.

## **The Power of Visualization**

Injury, sickness, and surgery can halt your physical yoga practice for a while. Being confined to a bed or chair may mean that your movements are limited to only lifting your arms—or even less than that. When the physical practice of the poses is impossible, yoga offers plenty of other options including breath and meditation, as we looked at in Chapter One.

Simply visualizing the poses (closing your eyes and imagining your body strong and in your favorite poses) can result in calm and peace—and a stronger practice when you return to your mat. Professional athletes have long used the practice of imagining their performance in races and competitions to ensure more successful outcomes. Visualizing movement, poses, sequences, or a peaceful place (like lying in savasana on your yoga mat) not only lowers anxiety and stress levels but also brings a sense of comfort and familiarity with the poses to help you when you can engage in the physical practice again.

## **Enjoying the Simplest Movements**

When you're able to move painlessly and with ease, it's easy to take simple, daily movements for granted. Injury, illness, and physical limitations are unavoidable parts of growing older, but they can feel surprising, unmooring, and frustrating, especially if you're an active person used to relying on and enjoying your body. When your movement practices shift, whether

temporarily or permanently, you have a choice: resist that change (and suffer as a result) or turn your full attention to what you can still do.

Accepting limitations and enjoying simple movements you can do is a practice. Experience (and attendant wisdom) gives you an advantage, though. You already know that to battle with the inevitable is a fool's errand. You can begin this practice now so you have preparation for when your physical abilities change.

Take a few moments to find stillness and let your body breathe. As you breathe, what do you feel? Your body is moving, and with every breath your clothes brush against your belly and remind you that even in this stillness, movement occurs. Wiggle your fingers and enjoy the sensation of each appendage moving near the others. Enjoy the ease of it, the silliness of letting your hands wriggle and squirm. Discover the delight in simple movements. This is what you can come back to when larger movements are unavailable.

## ***Raga and Dvesha***

In yoga philosophy there are several causes of suffering, called the *kleshas*; we cover these in Chapter Ten. Attachment (*raga*) and aversion (*dvesha*) are two. In approaching change, age, and injury, you can explore these ideas. Raga suggests that it is a very human quality to seek and get attached to the pleasant and comfortable parts of life. You may get so attached to pleasurable things that you come to expect them, which causes suffering and disappointment when things change. Dvesha is this idea inverted: just as you enjoy pleasant experiences, you're probably averse to unpleasant ones and try to avoid them. Raga and dvesha play a role in your journey toward embracing and enjoying simpler movements. When you imagine being limited in movement, you probably immediately recoil. That's dvesha. The idea of giving up what is pleasant—moving freely and without pain—feels impossible. That's raga. In order to enjoy the simple movements still available to you, you have to cultivate awareness of your attachment to what was and begin to build a new attitude toward your limitations. Instead of being pushed and pulled by attachment and aversion, you can find a middle path.

## **Finding the Right Breath for Now**

In Chapter One we looked at the ways you can use your breath to invigorate, calm, and sustain. As things change—your body, your practice, your goals and challenges—so too does the quality of your breathing. Your breath is along for this journey, and as your needs shift, you can bring conscious awareness to how you're breathing.

What does the “right” breath look like when you're hospitalized or in pain? Deeper and slower breaths might help in the face of acute pain. What does the right breath look like when you're confined to sitting for recovery? A quicker, rapid breath might add some invigoration. What does the right

breath look like during physical therapy? Rhythmic, measured breathing may help you stay focused.

Often, finding the right breath is simply a matter of looking at what your breath is automatically doing. By checking in, two things happen: you anchor your attention to the present and you get to decide if you'd like to change your automatic breathing and make it voluntary. Look at your breath right now. How are you breathing? Is your breath shallow or deep? Does your breath feel like the right breath for now? Would changing it feel better? Your breath is a helpful tool, and a simple exploration like that can keep you in the present moment.

You will continue to breathe until your last moment on earth; it is your most obvious link to the present and to life.

## **The Yogic Mindset**

As we looked at in Chapter Two, one of the benefits of practicing yoga and meditation is the development of a flexible mind. This yogic mindset, a cultivation of presence and gratitude, is helpful to maintain as your body shifts. Keeping your attention in the now brings happiness: when you're engaged, present, and mindful, life is sweeter. When you're in the moment, you can more easily see all the advantages you have and feel gratitude for the joys that remain in your life. This healthy perspective allows you to face life's changes with bravery, presence, and grace.

## ***Svadhyaya and the Long Game***

As we saw in Chapter Three, in yoga philosophy *svadhyaya* means “self-study.” Studying wisdom from other sources is useful for personal growth, but yoga suggests that the most important personal growth comes from introspection and self-awareness. When you set aside time to check in with yourself and listen to your internal dialogue, you can come away with a clearer sense of your fears and desires. Your times on a yoga mat or a meditation cushion can give you this opportunity, but a bike ride or hike can offer the same internal alone time. As you think about playing the long game and modifying your expectations as you age, remember that self-study is a necessary part of the journey.

## **Yoga after Illness or Injury**

By using visualization, simple movements, simple breathing exercises, and a yogic mindset, you can practice through injury, illness, hospitalization, and chronic disease. As you heal, recover, or find a period of wellness, your practice can continue to be a place you return to for refuge, personal reflection, and movement. When your body is weak or in healing mode, it’s important to find a practice that supports you where you are and offers brief moments of challenge to help you measure and build your strength.

We recommend a lot of restorative yoga—something we cover in Chapter Seven—and a focus on seated and low-to-the-ground poses. It’s useful, too, to pick one or two favorite “challenging” poses that you want to feel strong in again. A pose like plank—if suited to your injury and recovery—can be a useful pose to explore, since it has many variations. Working toward plank, you could begin with downward-facing dog at the wall, move to plank on your knees, and then eventually arrive in full plank. That shift through the levels of a pose could take a series of weeks or months, depending on the requirements of your recovery.

## **Yoga by the Decades**



The basic premise of this book is that your practice will and should change and evolve to fit your body's needs as you age. If you started practicing in your twenties or thirties, you may have been drawn to faster-paced, flow-style yoga. Your practice will change as your body, lifestyle, and available free time change. Everyone is different; what your body requires in terms of rest and challenge in your forties or fifties might be different from what your peers' bodies require. As you experience your practice through the decades, though, it may be helpful to imagine what you may want to focus on with every passing year. This general overview gives you a chance to do just that. Take it with a grain of salt, though, since everybody is unique. Your needs transcend suggestions here.

In your thirties and forties it becomes crucial to build strength in the glutes and core so you go into middle age strong in these areas. Sometime in these decades, years of sitting at a desk may start to take a toll. In fact, back pain often begins around this time. A focus on strong glutes and a strong core can help support the back; indeed, exercise can be more effective at treating back pain than other interventions. Adding in a Pilates class or core-focused yoga practice during these years might be wise. Lunge poses, chair pose, bridge pose, and boat pose are excellent for conditioning muscles of the torso and hips.

Major life changes occur in your forties and fifties. You might balance children leaving the house, elderly parents needing care, and increasing job pressure. It's important to focus on relaxation during these often-stressful years. Adding in restorative yoga poses can create balance. Your forties are a perfect time to start a more focused meditation practice, too. A regular yoga practice can lower stress levels. Women in their late forties may begin to have hormone shifts: gentle yoga and meditation can be the antidote to changing moods and energy levels.

Your fifties are all about balance, and a focus on balance poses is especially helpful. This is the time to become a strong and confident balancer—use it before you lose it! In addition to traditional balance poses like crane, tree, dancer, and Warrior III, poses that strengthen the outer hips are crucial. Standing star pose is a great pose for that—it offers balance and strength building for your outer hips. Since the only way to get better at balance is to practice, the more practice the better. Try to add a little balance practice to your daily life in your fifties; balance in crane pose as you brush

your teeth, for instance. Psychologically, turning fifty can feel like a major life milestone. Pranayama, or breath-work practices, can help with anxiety at this point in midlife. If you find yourself grappling with midlife issues, turning to yoga philosophy, like the Yoga Sutras, might offer a fresh perspective.

Moving into your sixties, seventies, and beyond, health concerns might take precedence when deciding what yoga practice to do. It becomes important at this age to make decisions that limit injury. Because of bone density concerns, forward folds might be better minimized or omitted. Lowering your head below your heart may no longer be safe because of blood-pressure concerns, glaucoma, or vertigo. Some of the traditional poses—like downward-facing dog—may be more accessible if practiced at a chair. Our later years can offer spare time to devote to an even deeper look at yoga philosophy and cultivating a stronger meditation practice, both of which may offer solace and a healthy approach to life's savasana.

# Chapter 10: Easing toward the End

At its heart, yoga offers the revelation that we are not only composed of matter. There is more to us, and our goal is *moksha*, liberation. This is a transcendence of the physical that unites the small self with the big Self—the universe writ large.

## Why We Practice Savasana

As mentioned earlier, *savasana* translates from Sanskrit as “corpse pose.” As we discussed in Part Two, this pose involves lying on your back on the floor, allowing your body to rest, letting your breath flow freely, and trying not to get attached to any thoughts that arise. In some ways it sounds like an easy pose, since you’re “just” lying on your mat. But if you come to yoga for relaxation and peace, letting go can be the most challenging part of the practice. Still, feeling comfortable with the stillness of savasana is most important: after all, you may master many poses with practice, but eventually the only pose you’ll need to know is this one.

We practice corpse pose in part as a reminder that we are all moving toward the final letting go. Advanced practitioners arrive in savasana with joy and relief, ready to relax into stillness after challenging poses. You can take that same idea into your navigation of the practice of life and aging: every year you are moving toward the end with joy and relief, celebrating the goodness you have experienced through enjoyment of life. Savasana can become a reminder that growing older and dying is natural, inevitable, and the appropriate end to a good life.

## Accepting Things as They Are

As the Yoga Sutras explain, all suffering comes from wrong-seeing, *avidya*. Avidya constitutes one of the five *kleshas*, or obstacles to the insight yoga offers. All the other obstacles derive from wrong-seeing, the inability to recognize things as they are. When we grow aware of these tendencies, we can stop engaging them, cease our suffering, and see things as they are. Then we are really practicing yoga.

To understand how wrong-seeing causes suffering and disconnection, think back on a time when you thought you were sure of something, then realized you had been wrong all along. This happens on every scale, from minor confusion to major misunderstandings with friends and family members, and it causes suffering. At our studio there is often “wrong-seeing” on a minor scale when people miss the direct route up the staircase and wind up taking a circuitous walk through the building. They didn’t see the right way to go, and it created needless effort (if not formal suffering). On a more serious level, you’ve likely told yourself a story about why someone acted a certain way and later learned you had misunderstood. This probably caused plenty of unnecessary suffering. By practicing attention and discernment, which you will develop through your yoga and meditation practice, you will begin to reduce this suffering and improve your ability to see things as they are.

Another obstacle to what yoga offers that feeds wrong-seeing is *asmita*, attachment to ego—a false sense of the importance of the self. This inevitably leads to suffering, as it creates a false sense of separation and distinction between you, those around you, and everyone else. This can cause even more pain toward the end of life if you are too proud to admit that you are aging or ill or need help. Happily, with age we have decades of experience with the broad spectrum of the human condition—the good and the bad. This can give us an opportunity to drop the ego in favor of connection and humility.

The twin obstacles *raga* and *dvesha* are opposites of each other. *Raga* means attachment to pleasurable things, or craving. On the other hand, *dvesha* means aversion to unpleasant things, or repulsion. Both are subsets of wrong-seeing, as they refuse to accept what is happening right now. To alleviate both, seek to find contentment in what is happening in this moment, even if that means simply appreciating your body’s ability to breathe.

The last of the obstacles to connection is the fear of death (*abhinivesha*). As we move toward the end of life, we gain experience with death, and we have the chance to move toward acceptance. Yoga philosophy encourages this acceptance; after all, death is inevitable. When we fear it or cling to life, we create our own suffering. When we accept the inevitable and see the deaths of our friends and loved ones as opportunities to celebrate their lives, we move from suffering to presence and acceptance. We move from fear to mindfulness. We move from disconnection to union. That is yoga.

## ***Ishvara Pranidhana***

In yoga philosophy *ishvara pranidhana* means “surrender to the divine.” Within that definition there is an opportunity to determine how you define “divine.” If you follow a religion, then your connection to the divine may be God. If you do not follow any organized faith, you may describe your experience of the divine in less-tangible ways. Finally, if you do not have spiritual faith, your sense of the divine may be derived from embracing the sacredness of life or finding a sense of awe and wonder in nature. Regardless of how you define the divine for yourself, yoga philosophy encourages us to recognize that there is something larger than ourselves, and to surrender to that something, whether it’s God, Fate, or Life. Surrendering is acknowledging a sense of connection between ourselves and the divine; after all, yoga means union. This idea—recognizing and yielding to something greater than yourself—can offer comfort as the end of life nears.

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## About the Models



Patricia Ann Phillips began her yoga practice in her California living room in 1977, alongside her mother and sister, following *Lillas, Yoga, and You* on PBS. She credits yoga with being the hub around which her life's wheel turns. Her favorite pose is Warrior II.



Victor Jimenez first came to yoga in 1993 at age thirty-one, when he was busy racing bicycles and running a business. He credits yoga with opening a path of contemplation that blends both spiritual and physical aspects. His favorite pose is also Warrior II.



Wes Rountree learned about yoga and the asana practice from his wife, Sage Rountree. His personal practice provides him with strength and composure whether doing laundry or working as a biostatistician. Boat is his favorite pose—or so he claims.

## About the Authors



*Sage Rountree (pictured left) and Alexandra DeSiato*

Sage Rountree ([sagerountree.com](http://sagerountree.com)), PhD, E-RYT 500, is an endurance sports coach and an internationally recognized authority in yoga for athletes. The author of six other books, including *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga*, *Racing Wisely*, and *Everyday Yoga*, she contributes regularly to *Runner's World* and

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