

STANDING YOGA PRACTICE

Introduction

We have been practicing awareness of the breath and the body while in stillness. Now we will practice another aspect of awareness - awareness of breathing and the body *while in motion* - through the practice of mindful yoga. The word yoga means "yoke", meaning to join. The practice of yoga involves the body and mind functioning as a whole, or as one - instead of being considered as separate which is common in western medicine.

Yoga's benefits include building muscle and joint strength and flexibility and more or less, "waking up" the body. However, it is important to approach this practice as we have approached all of the other mindfulness practices, with patience and gentleness and openness - without striving to achieve a particular result - without forcing anything.

While practicing yoga, observing any changes in the quality of the breath and body sensations that occur while stretching and moving. Also noticing any thoughts and/or emotions that arise.

Yoga also helps to cultivate acceptance - accepting the body as you find it right now without needing it to be any different. . . .
being aware when you approach your limit
all the while mindfully breathing
not pushing yourself too far but challenging yourself by pushing the edge of your comfort zone just a little. Paying attention to the body's signals because your limits will be different each time you practice yoga. . . erring on the side of being conservative
becoming familiar with your own body
letting go of any tendency to compare yourself - what you can or cannot do with - to anyone else or any younger version of yourself since everyone's body is different and change is constant.

To prepare for practicing yoga, wearing loose, comfortable clothing that will not bind as you move is helpful, as is removing your shoes and if possible your socks, in order to experience full contact with the floor. Avoid practicing yoga immediately after eating a large meal.

Most of these stretches can also be done sitting in a straight-backed firm chair if you experience any difficulty while standing.

Your position in a chair should be sitting slightly forward of the back so that your spine is supporting itself. Feel free to skip or modify postures that cause pain or strain and rest as long as is best for you between postures.

Standing Yoga Practice

Beginning by standing tall, but not stiff

looking straight ahead

legs about hip width apart

feet firmly planted on the floor, toes spread and planted so that you have a solid base

hips lined up over the ankles,

shoulders lined up over the hips

imagining the vertebrae of the spine, neck and head stacked in a straight line one on top of the other

and the crown of the head elevated toward the ceiling

arms hanging loosely at your side

softening the knees slightly

this is called "mountain pose" .

now allowing the abdomen to soften, shifting the awareness to the breath for three full breaths, observing the abdomen fill and empty (15 sec)

This yoga practice is a mindfulness meditation in which the object of the awareness is the body in motion. With that in mind, setting an intention to be with the movement, the accompanying sensations and the breath during this practice. It is not important that your positioning is exactly as pictured on your handouts, or as your teachers may demonstrate. It is important to work within the limits of your own body, challenging yourself a bit as you reach an edge, but not to the point of strain or pain. Noticing changes in the breath is a way to use the body's signals to back off a bit from a particular movement or holding a pose - when the breath becomes more shallow, more rapid, less smooth. Come out of the pose and rest whenever needed. This practice is healing when relaxing into the pose, but can result in injury if movement is forced. When challenging your edge, it may be helpful to breath with or into the area of the body you are stretching the most. As with other mindfulness practices, when the awareness wanders, bring it back to the present moment, making note of whatever drew it away before letting go of it.

On the next inbreath, we will begin the overhead arm stretch, slowly allowing the arms to travel upward in front of you, reaching the level where they are parallel to the floor and continuing upward, until the fingertips are reaching up toward the ceiling, palms facing the wall in front of you, upper arms parallel to the ears aware of sensations that arise particularly in the arms, shoulders and hands during the journey

pausing for a bit as the arms are fully extended, still breathing . and on the next outbreath, rotating the hands so that the palms face the walls beside you, floating the arms down in line with the sides of the body to make a "T" while the wrists are bending so that the fingertips continue to reach up toward the ceiling
from the "T", the arms continue to float down with the palms eventually facing the sides of the body, fingertips pointing toward the floor

Now in your own time, repeating the overhead arm stretch, this time keenly observing the sensations that arise during the journey, particularly in the arms, shoulders, sides and hands. (30 seconds?)

Coming back to mountain pose, checking in with the body, perhaps noticing similarities and differences in sensations comparing one side of the body to the other.

Are there any changes in the body and the breath since we began this practice?

Now, from mountain pose, beginning side stretches while inhaling, bringing the right arm up to make one side of a "T" , then rotating the hand so that the palm faces the ceiling, and continuing the upward journey till the finger tips are reaching toward the ceiling, the arm as close to the ear as comfortably possible, rotating the head to look upward toward the right hand . noticing what is going on with the left shoulder and arm . are they hanging loose or exerting effort that is not needed?

In this posture, is more important to maintain the mountain position of the shoulders rolled and for the arm to be straight than it is to have the arm close to the ear - any approximation of the arm parallel to the ear is fine

holding this position for one or more full breaths, whatever is best for you today noticing the gentle stretch along the right side of your body

while exhaling, reach just a bit higher and inhaling then while exhaling allowing the arm to slowly float down to the side

standing in mountain pose for two full breaths, observing . .

In your own time, repeating the side stretch on the right side and afterward, observing in mountain pose (do this myself to allow enough time)

Now repeating the side stretch, this time with the left arm - while inhaling, bringing the left arm up to make one side of a "T" , then rotating the hand so that the palm faces the ceiling, and continuing the upward journey till the finger tips are reaching toward the ceiling, the arm as close to the ear as comfortably possible, rotating the head to look upward toward the left hand . letting gravity take over in the right shoulder and arm

holding this position for one or more full breaths, whatever is best for you today
noticing the gentle stretch along the left side of your body
while exhaling, reach just a bit higher and inhaling - then while exhaling allowing the
arm to slowly float down to the side

standing in mountain pose for two full breaths, observing . .

In your own time, repeating the side stretch on the left side and afterward,
observing in mountain pose (do this myself to allow enough time)

Next from mountain pose we will begin the pose I like to call "Branches swaying in
the breeze" while inhaling, bringing both arms up to make one side of a "T" , then
rotating the hands so that the palm face the ceiling, and continuing the upward
journey till finger tips are reaching toward the ceiling, palms facing each other, and
the arms are parallel to and as close to the ear as comfortably possible .

On the next outbreath, swaying the arms and upper body to the right, noticing the
stretch along the left side of the body while holding this position for a breath if
possible, noticing the gentle stretch along the right side of your body

if at any time your breath becomes strained or choppy, back off until your breathing
becomes more smooth and continuous

on the next inbreath moving mindfully back to an upright position, fingertips
reaching toward the ceiling, and on the next outbreath, swaying the arms and upper
body to the left, noticing the stretch along the right side of the body while holding
this position for a breath if possible, relaxing into the posture

on the next inbreath moving mindfully back to an upright position, fingertips
reaching toward the ceiling, and on the next outbreath allowing both arms to float
back to the sides

standing in mountain pose for two full breaths, observing . .

In your own time, repeating the 'branches swaying in the breeze' and afterward,
observing in mountain pose (do this myself to allow enough time)

To begin shoulder rolls, on an inbreath, raising your shoulders up imagining that you
are touching the ears with the shoulders - possibly getting close, rolling the shoulders
to the back, imagining the shoulder blades squeezing together, roll the shoulders
downward and forward while bringing the shoulders toward each other in the front,
and then beginning again, rolling the shoulders up toward the ears, down and back,

squeezing shoulder blades together, rolling downward and forward bringing the shoulders toward each other in the front. .

pausing to observe in mountain for a couple breaths

Continue the shoulder roll forward once more on your own at your own speed and then reverse direction rolling backward, completing the backward shoulder roll twice in your own time . aware of the breath and body sensations as you engage in these movements . maybe hearing some snap, crackle and pop as you move .

Then pausing to observe in mountain for a couple breaths (time this myself)

From mountain, beginning neck rolls, dropping the chin toward the chest, rolling the head toward the right shoulder, gently to the back, careful not to hyperextend, rolling the head toward the left shoulder, and rolling downward, chin to chest. Repeating this one more time on your own, aware of the breath and body sensations

Now going the other direction, to the left while observing the breath and the body. Dropping the chin toward the chest, rolling the head toward the left shoulder, gently to the back, rolling toward the right shoulder, and rolling downward again, chin to chest.

Repeating this one more time on your own while observing (time this myself)

Now preparing for the rag doll stretch - from mountain, softening your knees a bit so when looking down, your knees positioned directly over your toes, so that if you look down you don't see your toes, slowly dropping the head forward, bring the chin toward the chest, noticing the sensations in the neck, allowing your head to continue the journey forward and downward, bending from the waist, all the time aware of the breath, arms hanging loosely . it might be helpful to try resting on each inbreath

and dropping further on each outbreath, until you reach the limits of your body today. Still breathing, allowing your head to hang loosely like a ripe fruit ready to drop off a tree branch while the rest of the body is sagging toward the ground . noticing the movement of the breath in the belly while you relax into this position for one or more breaths . . . maybe playing around with allowing the whole upper body to sway side to side
beginning to slowly roll up one vertebra at a time . . . rolling up on an outbreath and resting on an inbreath if you care . perhaps slowly walking the hands up the legs until you are once again upright in mountain
pausing to observe for a couple breaths . . .

Next, from mountain, bringing the heel of the right foot into contact just above the left ankle bone, like a kickstand . and finding a spot on the wall opposite or a couple yards in front of you on the floor to rest your gaze . allowing the sole of the right foot to travel up the left calf to a comfortable spot either below or above the knee, whatever feels right for you today . raising both arms out to a "T" or overhead, or somewhere in between . still breathing and as best you can relaxing into this balancing posture . noticing how many tiny adjustments the body makes to assist with balance . coming out of the pose when you need to and beginning again (time this by doing it myself)

pausing to observe in mountain (timing myself)

Repeating this process called tree pose, this time beginning with the left foot . from mountain, bringing the heel of the left foot into contact just above the right ankle bone, like a kickstand . and finding a spot on the wall opposite or a couple yards in front of you on the floor to rest your gaze . allowing the sole of the left foot to travel up the right calf to a comfortable spot either below or above the knee, whatever feels right for you today . raising both arms out to a "T" or overhead, or somewhere in between . still breathing and as best you can relaxing into this balancing posture . again noticing how many tiny adjustments the body makes to assist with balance . coming out of the pose when you need to and beginning again (time this by doing it myself)

pausing to observe in mountain (timing myself)

perhaps noticing if it one side was more or less difficult than the other

NEW SEGMENT (so that total time is 40-45 minutes)

From mountain, stepping the feet apart just a bit outside of the hips . bringing the hands to the hips, elbows bent and pointing toward the walls to either side of you, preparing to circle the torso from the waist, the same way we circled the head from the shoulders . on an outbreath, dropping the torso forward . then slowly circling to the right side . then to the back. then to the left . coming back to the front . and then back to mountain to observe and now in your own time at your own speed, continuing to circle the upper torso to the right from the waist with hands on

hips, aware of sensations perhaps stretching and pulling . noticing if this motion can be accomplished with the feet remaining firmly planted and the lower body quiet and if you haven't already, coming back to mountain, observing and as you are ready, in your own time and speed, circling at the waist again, now to the left perhaps aware of sounds that accompany the movement of the vertebrae . . a sense of balance and if you haven't already, returning to mountain and checking in with the body and the breath

Bringing the hands once more to rest on the hips, preparing to twist from the waist, and on an outbreath, twisting to look over the right shoulder . . . noticing the edge between going to far and challenging yourself, perhaps by seeing if you can twist just a bit farther on the next outbreath returning to the position you started in and repeating the twist, this time to look over the left shoulder noticing if this twist feels any different from the twist to the right side working your edge and when you are ready, coming back to mountain and observing now repeating the twists to the right and left in your own time and coming back to mountain to observe - 30 SECONDS SILENCE

Now preparing for the pose I like to call "airplane", another balancing posture, by bringing the arms to a "t" and shifting the weight over the right foot . . . and when you are ready, lifting the left foot off the floor . . . noticing how the body adjusts on its own to help keep balance and when you are ready, returning to mountain, observing the sensations of the breath and the body (10 seconds silence) now bringing the arms again to a "t" and shifting the weight this time over the left foot . . . lifting the right foot off the floor while aware of all the adjustments that bring the body into balance in this position and when you are ready, coming back to mountain to observe (10 seconds silence)

Now for the airplane part . . . in your own time, repeating this movement on both sides, arms in a "t", weight over one foot, the other, this time playfully experimenting with leaning side to side, dropping the torso to the front, tipping the torso to the back, just like an airplane gliding through the air, showing off . . . hopefully no crashing! (20 seconds silence) and if you haven't already, coming back to mountain, noticing if one side was different in any way from the other (6 seconds silence)

To complete this standing yoga practice, quickly scanning the body from toe to head, and then stretching in any additional way that feels called for.

EXTRA YOGA STUFF

Now for the **overhead stretch** for the upper back.

While exhaling, raise both arms with your hands reaching up over your head, interlace your fingers and rotate your hands so that your palms turn outward so that they face the ceiling while your head is dropping forward and down, letting gravity take over and notice while taking 2 slow breaths

now while exhaling, bend the elbows out a bit dropping your hands slowly behind your head which is still relaxed forward

holding this position for 2 breaths

now while inhaling, lengthen the arms up toward the ceiling and while exhaling slowly float the arms down to the sides, bringing your head slowly up to center

Notice your stillness while taking 2 slow breaths . .

Now still in the chair, or lying down if this is possible, place your hands on your belly, or if lying down and you have something small and soft, like a small pillow or a small stuffed animal like a beanie baby, just let it ride as you breathe in and out while observing

If you are lying down, bend your knees, roll slowly to your left side, and slowly sit up . and just breathe for a few moments to conclude this session of yoga . . .