

Playful Partner Yoga Postures

After teaching for 16 years, I have found several common areas, or trouble spots that keep students from experiencing great anatomical alignment and posture. These triggers can be found throughout many postures and would be helpful in this article to generalize just a few. The most important five points include weak postural muscles or poor core strength, rounded or slouching shoulders, weak ankles, a collapsed inner body, and an excessive low back.

The benefit of improving our posture will unblock the energy flow of our body, support and allow for deep breathing and allow us to become more efficient in our everyday tasks. Yogi's believe that a proper posture helps to bring about more peaceful and transforming energy. We are able to strengthen our nervous system with correct posture and breathing and even in the most challenging moments, be as Ghandi once said "the change, we wish to see". Truly the yogi's greatest posture is that of the mind.

After teaching for a couple of years, it was a reminder from my grandmother Vita, that she too had once been an avid yogi. Tell me more I would say. Well, through a sequence of conversations we shared for the past 7 years, she taught me what yoga was really all about.

She was a student of yoga for 45 years and she learned from her beautiful teacher in Venezuela. She said that the practice strengthens the nervous system and allows the individual to see one's ways without being reactive. Through many years of practice in her own life, she discovered the importance of not taking on other people's karma. When there is negativity and we

get caught or trapped by other people's emotions, we are in the same soup.

Natural law, she goes on to say is that one must first honor a bigger picture and put a golden light around your home and car. With meditation and yoga, one may learn to see the ego (which is natural and needs only to help preserve our self) and remain impartial. If we give in to others negative thoughts and vibrations, then we are at their mercy.

Yoga helps us to let it be. Simple continue to let it be and develop a mental attitude to stay neutral and avoid the ego. The right way to live is only through setting an example for others. So find yourself happy and be in harmony and remain light hearted. The grass grows in silence. The trees nourish itself up and down. Everything develops in silence.

This philosophy really is so simple. When we get overly concerned with matters of business, it is only our attachment to what we would like things to be that causes the suffering. When we can remain impartial under all circumstance, we can offer our support and be truly present for another. We are able through our own example to free ourselves. This will then help us to see more clearly and avoid aggressive behavior. We give the spiritual side of our being more energy and this makes all the difference. With a strong mind and an open heart, what have we then to fear-
Chinese Proverb

Asked once why he did not want to stay in the mountains if he was so peaceful, Ghandi replied that the heartbeat of humanity is in the everyday street life. Difficulties whether we like them or not help build character really are the language of soul. In another words, it is all about the way we travel, not where we go that matters the most.

Tadasana

Known in yoga as the blueprint of all yoga postures, Tadasana helps us find our center, both inside and outside the body. Neutralize low back which is the first common mistake in poor posture. We may also lift all 10 toes off the floor and feel the whole leg including major areas like the shin and quadriceps strengthening. Relax the shoulders down, keeping the rib cage stacked on top of the pelvis which is in neutral.

Modifications:

Use a block between the thighs and immediately wake up the 7,000 nerve endings (2nd only to the brain-WOW!) of the feet and toes. Activate the inner legs, ankle bones and area other areas that just feel stuck, lifeless, or droopy. Remember we practice to wake our bodies up and accept the challenge that gravity gives us. If we were to float in outer space, we would lose 30% of our bone density to the pressure we feel since we were born makes us stronger.

Breath in and say to yourself or out loud in class mountain, breath out and say solid. Tadasana teaches us immediately about our surroundings and our relationship to the big picture.

Try this exercise. If you stand in Tadasana with a typical everyday attitude and busy mind and just stand tall, notice a lack of awareness and power about yourself? Now have your partner come up and just push you. The pretense is up. You're actually not very stable at all, huh?

With your partner again, now take a moment to really commit to this present moment. Put yourself into this picture with all its surroundings. Take it all in, bend your knees, feel connected to

earth, feel your energy concentrated and feel expansion moving out from your core.

Ask your partner to now push you and see what happens. You are present, grounded and strong. When the winds of change or storms come, you will remain calm and collected.

You have discovered a healthy first chakra, or sense of security and tribal connection in the world. This is also the place where when we sit in meditation our energy drops and we feel what the Dalai Lama calls our interconnected and interdependent self.

When we live our everyday life from this awareness, we are empowered, self-directed and full of inspiring creative ideas and clarity in thought. We get the noble truth that an advanced yogi is not someone who can complete the third series Ashtanga sequence or meditate for eight hours; but the one who keeps their inner light bright and can remain calm when even the most terrible, challenging and unpredictable conditions keep arising. And sacred teachers usually tell us that these challenges keep our ego at bay and strengthen our life-force if we let it!

Child Pose

The universal sign of I need time to regroup. This posture is useful because yoga is not about achievement or competition. The sacrum is decompressing and releasing tension, the brain is calming, the low back is supported, the calf muscles are releasing and the legs are grounded.

A compassionate and qualified yoga instructor will encourage students to back off and take this pose. Since the real aim of yoga is to neutralize the ego and still the mind, a challenging posture or sequence is a great opportunity to excuse you from compulsive behavior, or competitive outlook and take the pose of the child. Just a few breaths in child's pose soothe again the busy nervous system and nurture your unique journey through life. Similar to Jungian thought, it is said that the real strength of yoga comes not by repressing but rather by listening to, and being with our moments of weakness.

If the hips are too tight, take the knees to the width of the yoga mat and bring the toes to touch.

Adjustments:

For this posture are to sit on the sacrum, roll onto the sacrum and press the sacrum strongly down with the flat of two palms.

Yoga Hint: Tight hips are common. Be patient if you feel the hips float upwards like a balloon! With practice your hips will open and your lower body will release to the earth.

Bridge Pose

This posture will set things right! Laying on your back, place a block between your feet and with bent elbows at either side, press into the triceps, softening the base of the head and neck and lift the heart upward.

Relax the shoulders. Notice the external rotation in the upper chest and ask students to connect their palms now to their feet and feel the back body lift. Bridge is beneficial for lengthening the spine and strengthening the muscles of the back. Soften contracted buttocks and keep pressing into the feet as well as triceps and lengthen the arms (sometimes clasping) to press down into the earth.

Bridge Variation:

From Bridge pose, place your hands next to your ears with your fingers facing the shoulders. Bring your chin in toward the sternum and draw the elbows in toward each other. Now, come onto the crown of your head and breath. This is the foundation for wheel pose. This is a typical yoga posture as it strengthens what is too soft and softens what is too hard. Visualize yourself opening up those blocks which say I can't and allowing the rivers of 'earnship' or lasting happiness to flow...

Just For Fun:

A great way to feel the benefits of bridge with a little more help is to place a block on high or medium directly under the sacrum. Relax around this support and allow the block to receive all the work in the legs and body. A small roll or blanket under the neck is also a nice support. This calming position supports a very important bone called the sacrum.

This bone is nicknamed 'holy bone' for good reason. It is here like a major highway in a busy city, that most of our central nervous system gets rerouted, actually over 65% of our brain and body speak to one another through this avenue.

Let the body and mind get reacquainted. They have each other's best interest at heart!

Downward Dog

Of course most of us are aware of the tension we carry in our back, but what about our arms or our legs! This brings us to what has been nicknamed "the salt of all yoga postures", downward facing dog.

The benefits of down dog are that we get to stretch out tension in the arms and legs, place the low back in traction and open the back of the legs.

From child pose, or table, bring your hips up into the air and press your body into an inverted V. Push energy into the palms and let the hands do the work. You will want to find your tailbone and tilt your hips or pelvis forward slightly. Keep your whole body alive and knees bent as you work your openings slowly.

Yoga Hint:

If you compare yourself to others, you will not be listening to your own body! You may find you're not as flexible in this pose but don't compromise compression in your shoulders with egotistical thinking in your brain. Instead of trying to look good (outer body), be a warrior (inner body).

Use this as an opportunity to become more enlightened, present and courageous to be yourself.

Downdog and this "dual action" of pushing palms forward and allowing the spine to lengthen back, releases tension in our lower back, and as an inversion stimulates and nourishes the parathyroid, endocrine or master hormonal glands of the body. When we life up into Downdog, we get an opportunity to see the world with a heart higher than the head.

DD Intro

Stand behind the partner and place hands on top of their thighs and pull back. Take a block and feel the inner rotation of thighs draw energy in and down toward the heels._

DD Sacrum press

Most common adjustment. Pacing the palm on palm or next to one another, arms straight, one foot forward and leaning into it, pushing there hips back more.

DD Straight Arms and Straight Legs. Take the outside of the sacrum and squeeze the soft tissue around the outer hips together and press back!

DD Proposal

On one knee, take both of your forearms around partner's top thigh and inner spiral the legs toward each other

DD Waterskier

Bring a strap over the back of the hips and through the inner thighs.

Like a waterskier pull your whole body straight and back.

DD Heel

Ask your students to bring their ankles wide enough so that they do not see them. Lift the toes up and feel the heels dropping down, great to strengthen the inner ankle and open the tight calf muscles that support the body all day...

Uttanasana

Keep the toes lifted the entire time and feel the legs acting like roots of a plant pulling nutrients from the earth.

Place weight equally into the four points of the feet

Shift weight into the front of the feet

Lift and open the toes

Legs are strong and upper body light

Verbal Adjustment:

Ask students to place their hands interlaced behind their neck where it meets the hairline and just rest the weight into the arms helping the neck to release more and more.

Uttanasana Variation

Interlace the hands behind the back and straighten the arms slowly. Adjustment here is to take your hands to their triceps and pull open the upper arm bones.

Cobra

Although cobra is never simple, this posture opens and improves posture in the upper back. The easiest way to practice is to remember this is about the whole body, not just the problematic tight upper back and usually poor core strength (my own included). When we keep practicing cobra, the result is a tremendous release of tension and stress.

Bring your hands under the elbows alongside the rib cage and fingertips facing the front of the mat. Engage the triceps long, retract the shoulders back and down, drop chin forward as if there is a small orange between the chin and sternum and lift from the back of the head (like the snake this posed is named after)!

COBRA

Lay on the belly, take the palms off the mat, lift the upper back off the mat. Feel the tired and overworked "zombie muscles" of the upper back slowly waking up!

Adjustments

Calf Press

Simply come around and press on the belly of the calf muscle while the student comes into cobra. Very beneficial for understanding that our legs or everyday, are very important to open our heart, our spirit!

Partner Shoulder Lift

Squat safely and reach for your partners shoulders and lift directly up. Reach over the top for 3 rounds and reach under the bottom for 3 rounds and pull those shoulders free again!

Receiver, be a warrior here and keep trying! Allow your partner to take a break every other round and push yourself up to cobra. Even if it feels like your moving mud, something is happening, I promise.

This is therapy for a collapsed spine, shrugging shoulders, and shortened neck! Let's release comparison and negativity and improve our ability, posture, circulation and self-discipline.

Deep Partner Backbend Lift

Bring your knees to your partners butt. Ask them to bring you their arms, grab them and let you lift them up! On an exhale breath, fall back with a straight body and practice connecting to your tailbone and core power. 3-5 lifts.

Salambasana

Practice lifting the arms alongside the body up slowly with the upper back. This intention will help students understand the movement of cobra. Keep the work in the whole back body: torso, legs, and feet. You can also have the student bring the arms out to an T.

Variation on Sukkasana

Have your student sit in a cross-legged position or 'sukkasana'. From behind ask them to lift their arms over their head. Grab your partner from the back and slowly turn their arms in and gently lift their arms up. This will feel like an amazing opening because it is.

Picture

Child on Child

My favorite yoga teacher, Jonny Kest has said that a single average American will not take one single backbend or heart opener in an entire one week period. And we wonder why our bodies are hunching over our children, our steering wheels, our dining room tables and our offices. We need a lot more backbends! They will increase the vital fluids like cerebrospinal and 'apana vayu', open energy currents, and feeling amazing.

Standing Backbend

With a partner, grab their forearms from the back, step between their legs and take a moment to get grounded. Encourage them to bring their tailbone forward as you ask them to trust you completely and drop to their deepest level. The whole upper back is getting open, supported and stretched! Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat if you like.

Picture.

Standing Child's Pose

Come together with your partner back to back. Place your elbows under your partner and gently take one small step forward. Get your connection and center first then, bend

your knees slightly and bring your tailbone under your partner's tailbone and lift them off the floor (if they are ready), and fold forward halfway.

Partner Dog Pull + Squat

Picture.

Face your partner, smile and reach for their forearms. Walk back about 3 feet. Keep the knees bent slightly and then fold forward keeping the knees bent. This action will create a deep release for the back and form a flat back or table pose.

Picture.

When both are ready, lower the hips $\frac{1}{2}$ way down and walk back a few inches more. Feel the tremendous power and support in this supported squat.

Picture.

Puppy Stretch.

Great way to warm up and open the upper back.

Much less weight to carry for the shoulders. Great medication for Downward Dog posture.

Picture. Arms.

Wall Dog. A great modification for Downward Dog because of it's honesty. It will help students connect to their legs without needing much weight on their shoulders

Picture.

Adjustment:

Place a block between the upper legs.

Thighs move in to strengthen the inner body through ankles, feet and toes. Give your students great encouragement! Tell them how good they are doing for their own body type
As a rule, keep ears in line with shoulders.

UpDog

Place a block between the inner thighs.

This engages the thighbones and helps the core stay connected to the legs and upper body. Neutralize the low back and lengthen.

Intro to savasana

Picture.

Legs represent our sense of security in the world. It's how we get around in the world. Because of long term sitting, quick movements or standing on our feet all day long: our legs can also suffer greatly.

Lift your student's legs up off the floor and keep your arms straight. Make sure to keep your arms and their legs straight and walk back about 4 inches, pulling your student's body toward you.

Picture

Come into a squat. Hold until you feel certain they have a deep stretch (about 10-20 seconds) and slowly release their legs on the mat.

Plank Chattaranga

Core Chapter

Safety in the workplace

Wheel Pose

For more advanced students and when the body is warmed up. Face the student's shoulders and help them to bring their elbows in. When they get ready to push up, support their upper back with your hands.