



The
Yoga Toolbox
An everyday guide for shaping your future

Jan Ahlund

A Yogic Toolbox: For Shaping Your Future

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To everyone willing to meet life's challenges with
awareness, acceptance and asana

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Chapter 6

LOOSENING THE LOWER BODY AND SPINE

Loosening and relaxing the lower body and spine requires that we stretch the muscles of the groin and open two important flexor muscles in order to create a free and easy movement in the legs and pelvis. Two muscles create the *ilio-psoas*, which combine from their respective attachments in the lower back and pelvis to the femur in the leg. In addition, we need to stretch, strengthen and balance the quadriceps and hamstring muscles of the thighs, along with the adductor on the inner thighs, the abductors of the outer thighs and the hip rotators. All these muscles work together to stabilize the hips joints that connect the legs to the torso so that we

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can move the lower back, hip and pelvis. They are vital in helping us stand, sit and walk with ease. The following exercises will awaken, contract, lengthen and relax these muscles, as they stretch connective tissue and increase the circulation of blood, lymph and energy through the lower body and spine.

Seated Staff Pose

Sit with your legs stretched out in front of you. Shift your weight onto the “sitting bones,” the *ischial tuberosities*, at the base of the pelvis. Place your hands flat on the floor next to your hips. Straighten your arms, bringing the shoulder blades back and down. Notice how your upper arms help to elongate your waist and chest. Feel the breath in your spine and notice how the spine elongates with each breath. Flex your feet and contract your quadriceps muscles (front thigh muscles). Feel the hamstrings in the back of your legs stretch and lengthen and notice how energy flows from the hips out through the heels of the feet. Tightening the upper thighs will draw the knees toward the hips.



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Keep your knees soft so as not to lock or hyper-extend them. If you are hyper-extending your knees, your heels will come up off the mat.

Place a small cushion under your buttocks if you have tight hamstrings and small bolster under your knees if you find you are hyper-extending your knees.



Continue to hold the pose visualizing energy flowing down your legs for about two minutes, so that muscles and connective tissue of the legs have time to stretch and be nourished. Your whole body will be engaged and active, yet you will feel a deepening sense of relaxation.

Tensing and Relaxing the feet in staff pose

By stretching the feet in this way you will be exercising the tendons of the feet, ankles, legs and even your back

Still seated with your legs in front of you and arms at your side, bring your attention to your feet.

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Stretch and wiggle your toes 16 times, then point and flex your feet 16 times, then, circle your ankles together in one direction then in the other 16 times.

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Breathe long and deep. Relax and repeat the whole series once again.

Cobbler pose

Sitting on your “sitting bones,” draw your feet in toward the groin. Bring your hands to outside of your feet and press the soles of your feet together. Sit with your back straight, lengthen your spine, lift your ribcage and bring your shoulder blades downward. Breathe, releasing your inner thighs, feeling the rotation of the femur in the hip socket and relax tension in the hip joint. Flutter the knees up and down, releasing a bit more tension from the hip. Massage or rapidly rub the legs and hips to bring more circulation into them. Remaining in the pose for an extended length of time will slowly release tightness in the hip. Hold the pose for at least one to two minutes.

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As you hold the pose, pull up on the muscles of the pelvic floor (tightening the muscles that stop urination). This directs energy into the hip joint. Imagine energy flowing into the hip joint freeing the thigh from the pelvis. Sitting in this position for a few minutes each day will slowly straighten the spine, open the hips and stretch the muscles in the groin. It can also help to relieve pelvic congestion and transfer energy from the hips to the spine. It is soothing to the nerves and the mind.

Leg cradle

Sit on the “sitting bones” with your legs crossed. Lift your right leg and place the right foot against the inside of your left elbow. Flex the foot to stabilize your knee. Your left arm encircles the outside of your right leg. Bring your right arm under your right knee and grasp your left hand, interlacing your fingers. You are cradling your right leg, with your right knee at the crook of your right elbow. Draw your leg closer to your chest and rock it from side to side for one to two minutes. Switch legs and repeat.

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One Leg Raise

Sitting with your legs crossed, take hold of your right foot and rub the sole a few times with your fingers moving in a spiral motion. Take hold of the center of the sole of your right foot with both hands. Press the toes forward, extending your right leg upward with an inhalation and bending it back on exhalation.



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Your left thigh remains firmly on the floor. Your chin is tucked. Both feet are flexed as you continue to extend and bend your right leg for about a minute. Then, raise your right leg extending it fully and hold it there for as long as is comfortable. Switch legs. Massage the sole of your left foot and repeat the extensions with your left leg. Your attention should be on releasing the muscles in the extended leg. This exercise helps to stretch the hamstrings, open the hips, nourish the adrenal glands, bring energy to the pelvic organs and build core energy.

Supine Cobbler Pose

Begin in cobbler pose, seated on your “sitting bones” with the soles of your feet together. Bring your arms under your thighs and slowly release your back and head to the floor. Keep your chin tucked in toward your chest as you roll to the floor. Keep the soles of your feet together but let your knees drop outward, toward the floor. Place your arms at the side of your thighs with the palms upward.



Breathe normally and relax for several minutes. This pose has the ability to soothe the mind as it lowers blood pressure and expands the chest and lungs and tones the abdominal muscles and loosens the hip joints. The next stage is dynamic. Keeping your lumbar spine on the floor and the soles of your feet together, move your legs upward and downward.

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Move in sync with your breathing. Inhale as you bring your legs upward and exhale as you bring them back to the floor. Continue for about a minute. Then relax again. This movement loosens the *psoas* and it increases energy into the hips, groins and legs. You may sense a new relaxing quality to the breath and mind.

In Yoga, we consider the manipura chakra to be an important point of power, balance and ease in the body. It is located at our center of digestion and assimilation and it is the region of navel and solar plexus. The solar plexus is like a second brain in the body, which monitors physical health. The region of the navel is a central control center, monitoring some 72,000 subtle energy circuits (nadis) in the body. In Yoga, the navel center is considered a “life point.” A weak and displaced navel is often symptomatic of disease and unease in the body. Constipation, loose bowel movements, acidity, heart disease, anxiety, bad dreams and PMS are often symptoms of this weakened center. The following exercises will work to strengthen the navel center.

Leg Circles

Lie on the back with palms flat to the floor. Place your fingers on your navel. Do you feel a pulsation? Breathe and notice the quality of the pulse at your navel. This series will strengthen the navel center, tone the abdominal and spinal muscles and open the hip joints.

Lying flat on floor with your legs extended, place your hands by your thighs, the palms down. Tighten your abdominal muscles and navel center and pull upward on the pelvic floor muscles. This will support your back and increase core strength. With an inhalation slowly raise your right leg upward, keeping it straight, foot relaxed.

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Lower your right leg, slowly with your exhalation. Switch legs. Lift your left leg upward with your inhalation and down to the floor with your exhalation. Then lift both legs up with your inhalation and slowly bring them down with your exhalation. Continue the cycle of alternate leg lifts, right leg, left leg, both legs, coordinating the movements with the breath for five cycles.

Next, lift your right leg upward again and rotate it in as wide a circle as possible. Circle the leg in a clockwise and then counterclockwise direction five times. The heel should not touch the floor. Breathe deeply. Switch legs and raise and circle the left leg in both directions five times.



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Lastly, raise both legs and rotate them together in clockwise and counterclockwise circles (three times each direction).



Relax deeply on your back. Place your fingers on your navel. Can you feel the pulsation? What is the quality of the pulse now?

Stretch Pose

This posture can be difficult but such intensity stimulates the digestive, circulatory, nervous and hormonal systems and removes lethargy. The regular practice of stretch pose can effectively eliminate nervous tension and bring about the deepest sense of relaxation, restfulness and inner strength.

Lying supine with your arms along side of your body, lift your feet six inches off the floor and flex your feet. Next, lift your head, upper torso and arms off of the floor, and gaze at your feet. Balance the body on your buttocks and keep the spine straight. Your arms should be in line with your toes. Keep the navel pulled inward and pelvic floor muscles pulled upward. Continue to hold with long, deep breathing as long as is comfortable.

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This develops the *psaos* and abdominal muscles in a balanced way. If you feel weakness in your lumbar spine bring your arms across your chest.



Hold this pose with long deep breathing for one to three minutes. Relax out of the posture when you feel tired and come back up into the pose. Lastly, come back up into the pose with the arms along side the body but this time, clench the fists and tense the whole body as much as possible for as long as possible and then relax out completely.

Happy Baby Poses

Both of these poses will bring about a sense of ease, relaxation and even happiness.

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A. Lying on your back, raise both arms and legs into the air and loosen them by shaking them gently. Breathe deeply and feel the abdomen engage as you continue to consciously release any tension or tightness from the toes, ankles, feet, legs, fingers, wrists and arms.



Then, stop shaking and just hold the arms and legs upward. B. Grab hold of the outer edge of your feet and bring your thighs down to just outside your chest, into your armpits. Your feet will be directly over your knees. Breathe deeply. This gently opens your hips, deepens your groin muscles and moves the sacrum back to its natural arch as it relaxes your abdomen. Breathe and relax.



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Knee-Down Twist

This brings wonderful release to the spine as the lower back muscles stretch and release along with the outer hips, *psoas* and the thick band of connective tissue which runs down the outer thigh. One cannot help but relax and smile.

Lying on your back, bend your knees and bring your arms out to the side of your body. Cross your right knee over and on top of your left knee. Hook the right foot under the left calf muscle. Drop both knees to the left. Your right hip will shift a bit to the right.



You can keep your head and neck centered, or you can rotate it to the right. Relax and allow gravity to release the legs more deeply into the stretch. The belly will rotate gently toward the right shoulder. Breathe in this position for a minute. Then lift your knees, bringing your pelvis under you again and align your spine, before repeating to the opposite side.

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Relax onto your back. Realign your spine and enjoy.





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The Yoga Toolbox
An everyday guide for shaping your future

A Yoga Toolbox is a beautiful book that offers training in the simple tools to live a long and happy life. It is written both for those who are new to Yoga and for those who feel rather uninspired in their practices.

A daily Yoga practice can be difficult to establish due to resistance in the body and the mind. Therefore, these trainings are short and wholistic. They provide both physical and mystical ways of relaxing, harmonizing and healing the physical body, breath, mind, emotions and spirit. You will learn to experience joy in the physical movement of postures and through a conscious awareness of your energy body. Dynamic energy, enthusiasm and awareness will increase and you will learn how to apply these to your relationships and to shape your future.

There are fourteen inspiring and empowering daily sets of Yoga practices that build upon one another and are attentive to the unique need and capacity of individuals. Each set has a detailed description and photos. Included within the sets are postures (asana), breathing techniques (pranayama), muscular locks (bandhas), physical gestures (mudras), techniques of meditation and training in awareness.