

This Yoga lesson is aimed at bringing awareness to the hip girdle.

I have designed it to be followed by those with at least one year's experience of Yoga, and is best followed under the supervision of a trained and qualified Yoga Teacher.

If you have any health conditions that make you doubt the suitability of this lesson, please discuss these with your Yoga teacher and a suitably qualified health professional. Bear in mind that many health professionals are unaware of Yoga postures and how they work on the body, and so you may need to discuss it in more detail than is in this document.

Nothing replaces the observant eye of an experienced Yoga teacher, so I offer this lesson as extra to your regular Yoga class, not a replacement. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, please contact me via the contact box.

Here is the lesson in detail, and after the explanations I have listed all the postures.

Start by sitting or lying quietly, bringing your awareness to the present moment – yourself, just as you are, where you are, and how you are right now. Become aware of your breath, without altering it, and don't start your posture work until you and your body are ready.

Spinal rolls

If your mat is not on carpet, you may wish to lay your blanket on top of it for spinal rolls, or use two mats, to act as an extra cushion for your back.

Start sitting on your mat, then roll backwards, allowing your knees to bend and your legs and feet to tip over your head. Then roll forwards, allowing your legs/feet to reach the mat and your head to drop over the knees.

Keep rolling back and forward.

This gives a massage to the back, helping to open the spaces between the vertebrae, and stimulates the circulation.

Cautions:

It is important that your back rolls smoothly, and that *all* of your back touches the floor at some point during the roll. Some people find that the lumbar back (lower back) does not completely touch the floor, because their pelvis is tilted slightly forwards (hollow back). If you find this happening to you, please *stop* before it causes injury. It may be that there is tension there, and you need to loosen that area first.

Leg lowering

Lie on your back with the left leg straight up in the air, and the right knee bent with the right foot flat on the mat. Check that your pelvis is level, the weight even on both buttocks, and the rest of your body relaxed.

Slowly lower the left leg to the floor (then repeat on the right).

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Then repeat each side with both legs straight.

Repeat this, and pause the movement when the upper leg is at 60° to the floor, 30°, 15° and 10°. Try it first with the lower leg bent, then both legs straight.

It is very important to keep the lumbar back flat on the floor, and to be aware if you are building tension in any other parts of the body. Common places for this are the shoulder, upper back, lower back, face and hands. Consciously relax all parts of the body that are not directly engaged with moving the leg. Ensure you keep breathing evenly: your breath is an important indicator of how your body is faring in a posture. If you hold your breath, or it becomes laboured, erratic or uneven, then your body is in stress. Come out of the posture and make a decision as to whether you will continue, or practise in a less challenging way.

If you find your legs want to drop to the floor, practise with bent knees.

Repeat this movement, this time keep the right knee bent and the right foot just off the floor (about ten centimetres) and follow the same precautions as above.

This series tones up the muscles of the abdomen, and brings awareness to the whole of the upper body.

Notice what happens in your back, buttocks and pelvis as your leg reaches the ground. You may find that you have been holding some tension there, and the final part of coming to the ground is uneven – this is so useful to know as we are often unaware of how we do some things in our body, and do them ‘thoughtlessly’. So practise this with awareness, and carry that awareness into other actions and movement.

Supta Baddha Konasana – supine bound angle pose

Remain lying on the mat. Bend your knees and allow the knees to drop out to the sides, placing the soles of the feet together, the outer edges of the feet on the ground.

Allow gravity to encourage the knees towards the ground. If your legs begin to shake, then you are holding them in stress. Try moving your feet closer to, or further away from your body. Or release from the posture, take a rest and try again – as many times as your body needs.

Some people find that the lower back wants to arch. Try to resist this. Some ways to help can be: change the position of the feet – closer to, or further away from the body; place a Yoga block or folded blanket under the buttocks. Each pelvic girdle is similar – and unique. Different students find different adaptations work - depending on their particular pelvis.

Supine Twists

Lie on the mat with the arms stretched out at shoulder height (or a little lower – never higher). Move the whole of the body from the shoulders down, towards the right side of the mat. Cross the right leg over the left at the thigh. Have the backs of the hands on the floor, palms open, each finger and thumb on the floor.

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Allow the pelvis to tip to the left so that you end up with the right hip vertically on top of the left. The right knee may touch the floor, but don't force it. (The earlier shift of the body ensures that you end up in an approximate straight line on the mat.)

Some people find that this can cause tightness in the right shoulder. This posture is all about encouraging the upper back to twist. Some people's shoulders both stay on the ground, some don't. Do not worry if yours don't – it's more about what is happening in the spine. Let the right arm find a place where the shoulder is comfortable – working, but not likely to cause pain – and let gravity, and a relaxed upper body, help the spine to twist. The shoulder moves down as a consequence of the twist – not the other way round. Do not force it.

Many (probably most) of us can twist our spines quite easily in the lower back – the area where many people get back pain. In Yoga we acknowledge this, and so we work on twisting the upper back – which is not so easy, but will benefit from more movement. So turn your awareness to both the upper and lower back – aiming for the twist to happen high, in the thoracic back and the lumbar region to be stable.

Some people with flexible bodies, and those who might have practised incorrectly in the past, find that they have a bit of movement in the sacral area, and some yoga postures can encourage this area to move more. Please resist this. The sacrum needs to be kept stable. There is meant to be a little mobility here, but ligaments are there to hold the area steady. If the ligaments are overstretched it is very difficult to stabilise the area again.

This is a very good twist, because practised with the sacrum vertical, it ensures that the twist happens higher in the back and the sacrum and lower back are stabilised.

Supta Padangusthasana – supine hand to foot pose

Padangusthasana is a standing pose – a balance where we stand on one leg and take the hand to the big toe of the other leg. Unless you are extremely flexible in all the right areas, any attempt to practise this posture standing will result in tightening areas which don't want to be tightened, and efforts to stay upright will cause tension in the body. Most of us get more benefit from practising this posture either standing with one foot resting on a support, or lying down.

For this lesson, I recommend lying down. There are two aids which can help a lot with alignment (thus practising safely). We can use a belt around the ball of the raised foot; and we can use a soft block or folded blanket tucked in under the buttock of the raised leg. The belt gives support to the leg when it might tire; the blanket or block helps keep the pelvis stable and 'square' with the rest of the body, which is really important at all times. The temptation might be to take the raised leg as close to the floor as possible, which often compromises the pelvis. Please remember to have the buttocks evenly on the floor, even if the leg is high off the ground.

I recommend practising this posture at least twice to each side with the aids, and then the next time you may consider practising without the aids (you don't have to, but our bodies

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will learn from the correct alignment in the earlier practice, and will carry this learning through to the latter practice.

Another point to remember – in all the postures, respect how your body is today. By really listening to your body, you will find that some days your body will like to stretch itself a lot, and other days it might prefer a more relaxed session – for a host of reasons. Give your body this respect and it will reward you by resisting injury, and directing your internal attention to the places that need it.

Back to Padangusthasana. Extend the right leg along the mat, and root the whole leg into the ground. Flex the ankle as though you are standing on that foot. Bend the left knee and clasp the leg around the back of the thigh or front of the shin and let the leg feel heavy as it drops towards the abdomen – this helps to open the hip socket. Don't pull the leg – the hands are there to keep your awareness on a heavy leg.

Then loop the belt around the ball of the left foot and extend the foot skywards, holding the belt in two hands. Relax the shoulders on the mat, allowing the upper chest to feel broad and open. Have a bend in the elbows, and it's fine to rest the elbows on the ground. Check again that there is no tension in the shoulders. Feel the head of the femur (thighbone) rooting downwards – don't rush this stage to get to the more 'advanced', showier stage of the posture; it's important as it begins to open the hip socket more.

Then transfer the belt to the left hand only and move the left leg in a semi-circular way so that the big toe keeps moving and pointing towards the face, and the whole leg circles towards the floor beside the body. The head of the femur rotates in the hip socket. (NB: few people's legs reach the floor(!), and if they do, their whole leg is above hip level - not below.)

After a few breaths, raise the leg to the vertical, bend the knee to the body for a little while, then extend the leg along the floor. Many people find that the left side of the body now feels longer than the right side – this is because you have opened the hip socket.

Take a rest before repeating on the other side, then once or twice more to each side, and on the last time you may consider not using the block and belt.

Sense if your body would like to repeat the twist.

Adho Mukha Svanasana – downward face of the dog

Sarvangasana – shoulder balance

I won't go into detail here – anyone who is practising the other postures in this class will be familiar with downward dog and shoulder balance. They deserve whole explanations of their own, which I will include in another blog. They are in this lesson because inversions give the back a rest, helping the vertebrae to find space between each other – allowing twists to happen more easily. There is a stronger twist coming later in the class, so spend some time in dog and then shoulder balance, having a rest now and again when your body asks for it.

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These postures are important to the flow of the lesson so please include them. If you are not practising Sarvangasana because you are menstruating, have neck problems, or other health reasons, lie on the floor with your legs up the wall or resting on a chair.

Dandasana – staff or rod pose

Sit on the floor or the front edge of a block or folded blanket with the legs outstretched. Flex the ankles, without tension. Have the feet vertical, and the knees facing the sky – for some of us this means we need to draw the outer edge of the foot towards the body. Root the legs and heels into the ground. Sit tall with the tips of the fingers on the floor beside you, or slightly behind you. The main thing is to keep the pelvis level and with a slight forward tilt. Some students find the pelvis tilts back, causing the back to round, shoulders to slump, and chin to jut forward. If your pelvis resists this posture, use a block or blanket(s) under the front of the sitting bones to tilt it to the neutral position.

Ardha Padmasana – half lotus pose

Please do not force your legs into this posture – you might injure your knee or store up problems for the future.

From Dandasana, lift your right leg so that the right ankle crosses the left thigh. Try to avoid the ankle resting on the thigh. Press the sitting bones into the ground. Contract the quadriceps. Pull up inside from the pelvis.

Now most pictures of this pose will show the right knee resting on the floor in line with the right hip. This is the eventual aim. Most of us never reach the eventual aim. We are all practising. Some people are more flexible all over; some are more flexible in some parts of the body; some practise daily; some practise only at the weekly class – and they miss some of those. Wherever *you* are is okay. Do not berate yourself for not being as flexible or as adept as the student in front of you, or the practitioner on the internet; respect and rejoice in our differences.

If your knee does not reach the floor DO NOT FORCE IT DOWN. You may find it helpful to support the right leg and knee with your hands. You may find that as you release into the pose, your knee travels downwards a little. If it doesn't that's okay – as long as nothing is hurting. Check when your legs want to unfold – it may be after four or five breaths, or more, or immediately.

Repeat on the other side, and if Padmasana *is* a possibility for your body, then go for the full posture.

Repeat on both sides.

It seems appropriate here to remind all Yogis and Yoginis of the need to feel the difference between a good stretch and pain. Pain is never a good idea. Pain will go on hurting for quite a few days afterwards, if not weeks or even months. After a good stretch, you may feel the next day or three that you have worked hard, and it will pass. If in doubt please err on the side of caution.

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Ardha Matsyendrasana – half Lord of the Fishes pose

(NB: there are other variations to this posture)

The preceding postures have been aiming towards this twist.

Sit in Ardha Padmasana. If this won't happen today, you can bend the right knee and place the foot high up against the left thigh and the ankle and knee on the floor, pressing the heel into the groin.

Or if your knee is not happy with this, from Dandasana, keep the body facing the left leg with the right leg extended straight so that there is a wide angle between the legs.

The outstretched leg(s) is an active leg, with the ankle flexed and toes and knee pointing skyward. The ball of the foot moves away from the groin.

Remembering how the spine felt in the inversions, extend the spine in the same way, with the vertebrae moving away from each other. Draw the shoulder blades down towards the waist and apart from each other.

Take the right hand behind the body and grasp the right foot. If you are practising one of the adaptations, or if there is just too much of a gap between the hand and foot, loop a belt around the right ankle/foot and hold the belt with the right hand (the arm and/or belt will be across the lower back).

Keep lifting the waist and extending the spine.

Ensure that the pelvis is stable, and the torso is still directly in line with the left leg. Reach forwards with the left hand to clasp the outer edge of the left foot.

Slowly – turn the torso and head to the right.

Remember the caution further up in this article about keeping the stability in the sacrum – do not twist in the sacrum, do twist in the upper spine – keep the back of the pelvis in one plane.

All of this requires concentration – not force. As with all twists, do not use the shoulders to pull the body round – we are twisting the spine here.

Now check if there is anything else your body would appreciate before you go into Savasana (corpse pose/relaxation). Then relax and let go.

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Here is the full lesson plan

Spinal rolls

Leg lowering in stages:

One leg at a time (other leg straight, or bent knee)

Two legs

One leg at a time with the opposite foot just off the floor

Supta Baddha Konasana – Supine bound angle pose

Supine twists with crossed legs

Supta Padangusthasana – Supine hand to foot pose

Supine twists

Adho Mukha Svanasana – Downwards Face of the Dog

Sarvangasana – Shoulder balance

Ardha Padmasana – Half lotus pose

Ardha Matsyendrasana – Half Lord of the Fishes pose

Savasana – Corpse pose

When we practised this lesson in my class recently, several students said that afterwards they could sit in Dandasana with much less effort than before.