

Yoga Asanas

From Perfect Health, by Deepak Chopra, M.D.

Health Education Programs

Volume one

A few general precautions apply to all body types. Do not exercise:

- *Just before or after a meal.* Exercising at these times lowers your agni, which you want at its highest. Allow at least half an hour before a meal and one to two hours afterward without exercising. Walking right after a meal, however, is an exception. Taking a leisurely fifteen-minute walk after lunch and/or dinner stimulates digestion (anything longer or harder would compete with it). Exercising after sundown is discouraged by Ayurveda; it is better to let your body slow down in the evening and prepare itself for bed.

- *In the wind or the cold.* Both Vata and Kapha dosha resent the cold, as we have mentioned. If you go out for a walk in winter, keep yourself bundled up and do not breathe strenuously. Heavy breathing of cold, damp air is bad for the respiratory tract. Also, any strong wind upsets Vata dosha and removes the calming effect of a good walk.

- *In the broiling sun.* The reason only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun is that harsh sun inflames Pitta dosha, raising your body heat at a time when exercise is raising it enough already.

Along with moderation, the key to balanced exercise is regularity. The doshas always tend to reinforce themselves. If you have neglected physical activity for a while, your body will be used to inertia. Once you return to even a little activity, your doshas will rise to a level of better balance and want to stay there. So, do everything you can to start a program that you will enjoy for years, preferably for life.

THREE-DOSHA EXERCISES

Now I would like to describe the three-dosha exercises taught at our clinics: the Sun Salute, the set of gentle yoga positions, and balanced breathing. Most people are unfamiliar with these exer-

cises and may be tempted to identify them with exclusively Eastern pursuits. You may think that yoga is impossible for you, having seen pictures of human pretzels twisting their bodies into unnatural poses.

In fact, the following exercises are very easy to do. Only the Sun Salute requires some patience to master; the others do not take any special skill. The whole emphasis on perfect performance is misplaced. These are exercises for tuning in to your body. Anyone can do that, simply by letting the mind relax into each pose. Don't even think of how you look or how close you are coming to the ideal positions. Whatever you achieve is right for you. This approach makes each exercise feel good as you do it and even better afterward. Everyone feels pleasantly relaxed for the next few hours after doing a short Ayurvedic routine.

The following descriptions were provided by Bija Bennett, an expert, talented yoga therapist who heads up the neuro-muscular integration program at our Lancaster facility.

SUN SALUTE (*Surya Namaskara*)

Time: 1 to 2 minutes for each cycle, moving slowly

Repetitions: 1 to 6 cycles in the morning, more as you become experienced

The Sun Salute (*Surya Namaskara*) is a complete Ayurvedic exercise that simultaneously integrates the whole physiology—mind, body, and breath. It strengthens and stretches all the major muscle groups, lubricates the joints, conditions the spine, and massages the internal organs. Blood flow and circulation is increased throughout the body. With regular practice, you will gain stability, suppleness, flexibility, and grace.

Here is a cycle of 12 postures. Perform them in a fluid sequence one right after another. Synchronize each motion with the breath. Move smoothly into each pose, breathing fully and easily so that each cycle takes about 1 minute.

Start slowly, avoiding strain, and listen to your body as you gradually increase the number of Sun Salute cycles you do. This

step-by-step progression eliminates the possibility of pulling or tiring your muscles, especially if you haven't been exercising regularly. Stop when you notice that you are breathing and perspiring heavily or feeling too tired. If this occurs, lie down and rest for a minute or two until the breath is free. With regular performance, your capacity will easily and naturally increase.

In the Sun Salute, a specific pattern of breathing is encouraged. Inhale to extend your spine vertically or to open, lengthen, or fully elongate the body. Exhale to bend or fold the body, creating a flexing of the spine. Each of your movements should be an extension of the breath in order to facilitate the motion. There is one transitional position in the Sun Salute where the breath pauses for a moment before you continue into the next pose. Otherwise, let your breathing be fluid and continuous throughout the entire exercise.

HOW TO PERFORM THE SUN SALUTE

Perform the following postures in a flowing, moving sequence one right after another. Remember to use the breath to connect each pose with the one following it. Emphasize the expansion of the chest on inhale and the contraction of the abdomen or belly in a bending motion on exhale.

1. **Salutation position (*Samasthiti*)**. Begin by standing tall with the feet together in a parallel position. Stand evenly on both feet and lengthen the spine upward. Place the palms of your hands together in front of your chest. Lift the chest and expand the ribs as you look straight ahead.

2. **Raised arm position (*Tadasana*)**. On the inhalation, slowly extend the arms over the head. Lift and expand the chest as you continue lengthening the spine while allowing the head to look upward. Keep breathing evenly as you continue right into the next pose.

3. **Hand to foot position (*Uttanasana*)**. As you exhale, bend the body forward and down, lengthening the spine, arms, and neck. Let the knees soften or bend freely, bringing the hands to the floor. Avoid collapsing the chest or overrounding the upper back. Keep the elbows and shoulders relaxed, and don't lock the knees.



Figure 1. Salutation position.



Figure 2. Raised arm position.

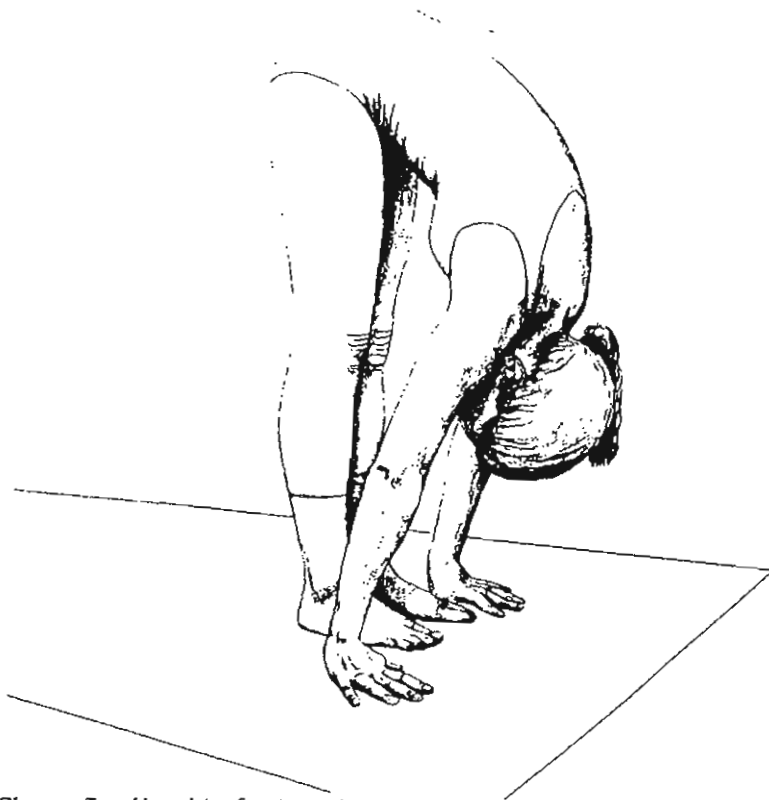


Figure 3. Hand to foot position.

Increased flexibility and suppleness in both the legs and the spine comes with regular practice.

4. Equestrian position (*Ashwa Sanchalanasana*). On your next inhalation, extend the left leg back and drop the back knee to the ground. The front knee is bent and the supporting foot remains flat on the floor. Simultaneously extend or lift the spine and open the chest. Allow the head and neck to lengthen vertically.

5. Mountain position (*Adhomukha Svanasana*). On the exhalation, bring the left leg back to meet the right leg—legs both at hip width apart, hands at shoulder distance. As you raise the buttocks and hips, press down with the hands, allowing the spine to release upward and back. Stretch the heels down toward the floor and

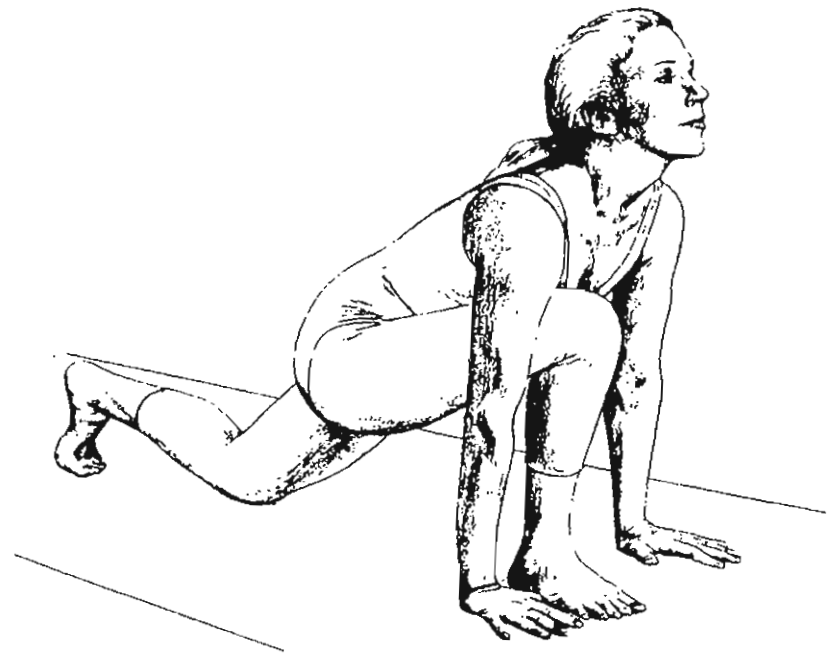


Figure 4. Equestrian position.

lengthen through the backs of the legs. Relax and free the head and neck. The body forms an even inverted V from the pelvis to the hands and from the pelvis to the heels.

6. Eight limbs position (*Ashtanga Namaskara*). Gently drop both knees to the ground and slowly slide the body down at an angle as you bring the chest and chin to the ground. All eight limbs—both the toes, knees, chest, hands and chin—touch the floor. Hold this very briefly and then continue to move into the next pose.

7. Cobra position (*Bhujangasana*). On the inhalation, lift and expand the chest forward and up as you press down with the hands. Keep the elbows close to the body and continue to extend

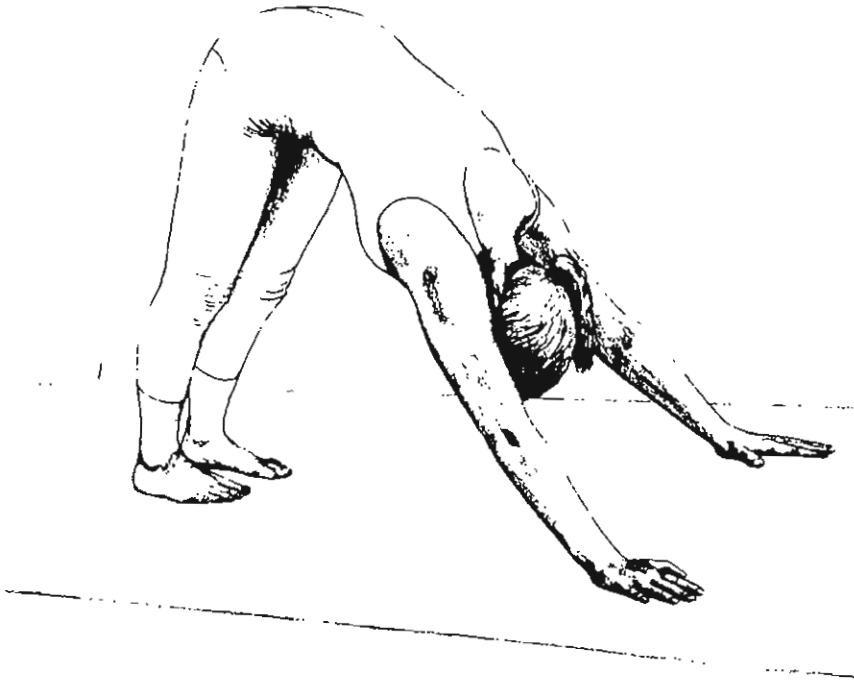


Figure 5. Mountain position.



Figure 6. Eight limbs position.

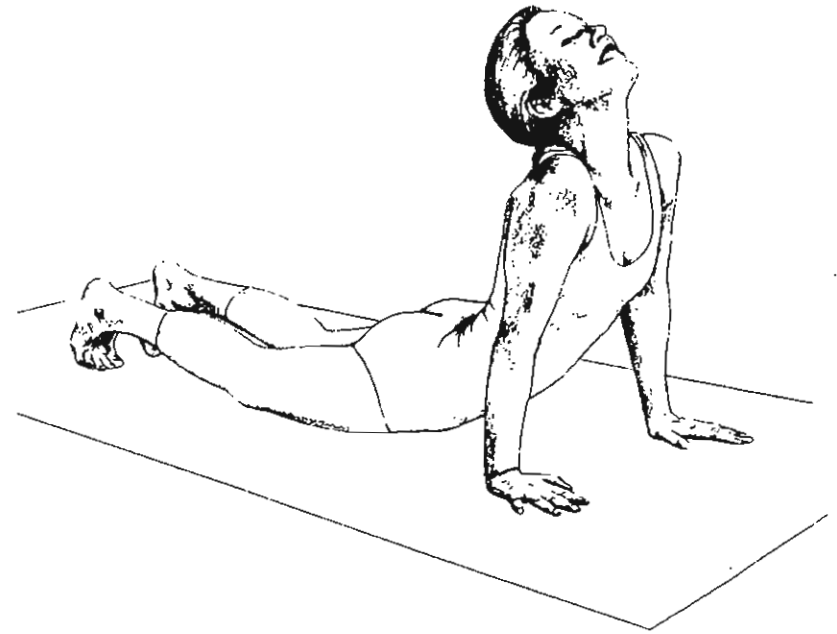


Figure 7. Cobra position.

the spine upward. Open and widen the chest and move the shoulders down and away from the ears to free the neck and head. Let the upper back widen and lengthen. Do not initiate this movement with the head or lift the body with the neck.

8. Mountain position (*Adhomukha Svanasana*). Repeat position 5. On the exhalation, raise the buttocks and hips, press down with the hands, and allow the spine to release upward and back. Stretch the heels down toward the floor and lengthen through the backs of the legs. Relax and free the head and neck.

9. Equestrian position (*Ashwa Sanchalanasana*). Repeat position 4. Inhale and swing the right leg forward between the hands. The left leg stays extended back, knee to the ground. The front knee should be bent with the foot flat on the floor. Extend the spine, lifting the chest forward and up. Allow the head and neck to lengthen upward.



Figure 8. Mountain position.

10. **Hand to foot position (*Uttanasana*)**. Repeat position 3. As you exhale, step forward with the left leg and continue to bend the body forward and down, lengthening the entire spine. The arms and head follow in line with the spine. Both hands remain on the floor. Let the knees soften or bend freely. Avoid collapsing the chest or overrounding the upper back. Keep the elbows and shoulders relaxed.

11. **Raised arm position (*Tadasana*)**. Repeat position 2. On the inhalation lift the arms from the upper back as you open the chest forward and up. Do not lift the body from the head or neck. Continue to lift and expand the chest as you come up, extending the arms over the head. Keep the breathing smooth, deep, and continuous.

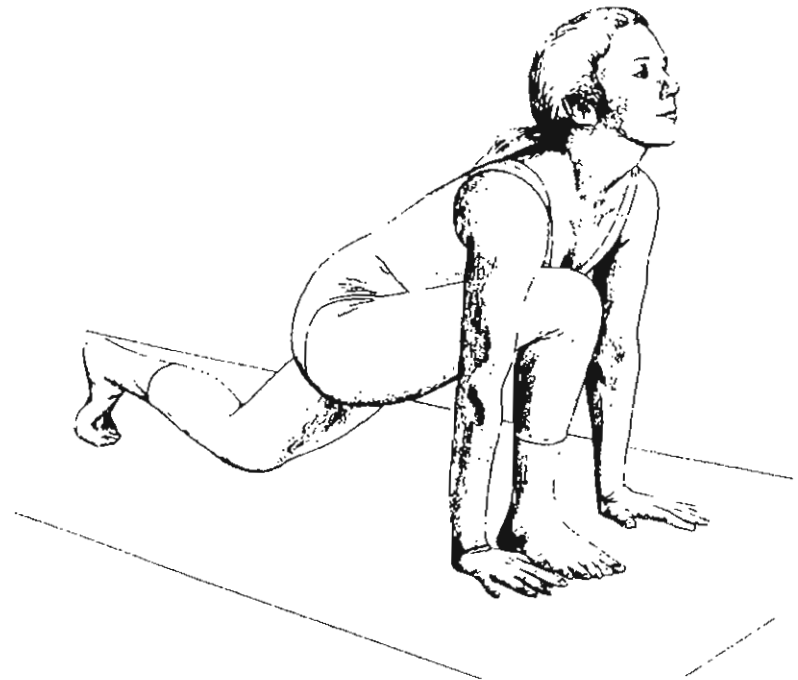


Figure 9. Equestrian position.

12. **Salutation position (*Samasthiti*)**. Repeat position 1. Exhale as you lower the arms and bring the palms of your hands together in front of your chest. You are standing tall with the feet in a parallel position at hip distance. Lift the chest and expand the ribs as you look straight ahead. Vertically lengthen the spine and neck.

This completes one cycle of the Sun Salute.

Hold the Salutation position while continuing to breathe for a few breaths. Then begin the second cycle. This standing Salutation position becomes position 1 of the second set. On the next inhalation, continue into position 2—the raised arm position—and repeat the movements in a fluid sequence.

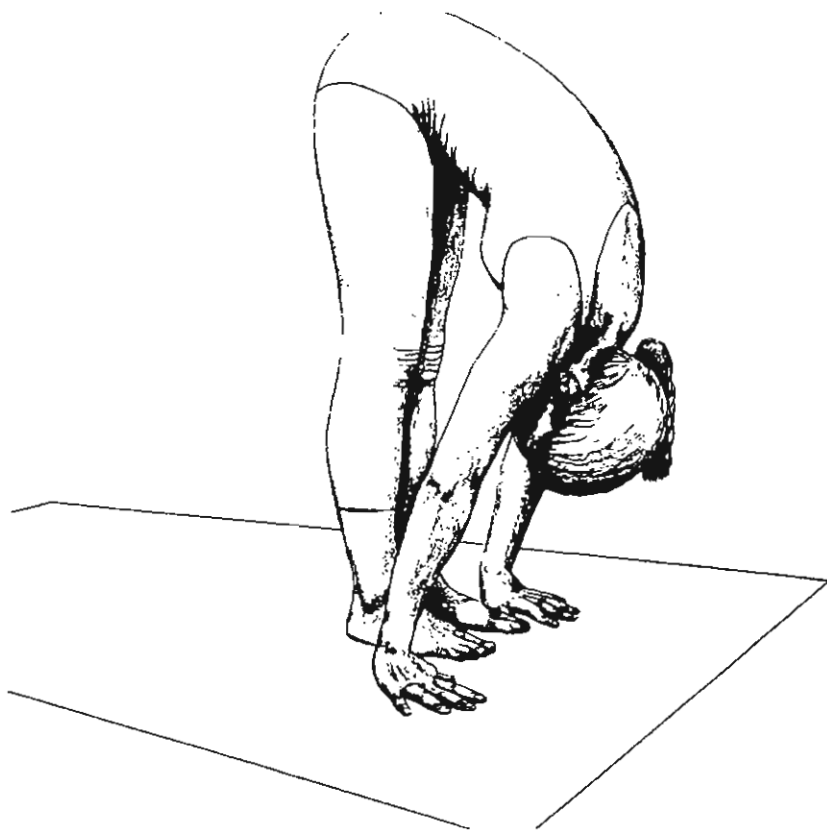


Figure 10. Hand to foot position.

On subsequent sets of the Sun Salute, you will alternate which foot is extended back and which swings forward in positions 4 and 9—the Equestrian position. In the first cycle, the left foot extends back in positions 4 and 9, with the right foot forward. Alternate which leg extends back on the next set and continue to alternate sides with each new cycle.

After you have completed the sequence of Sun Salutes, lie on your back, lengthen the spine, and let the body completely relax. Close your eyes and rest for a minute or two. Allow the breath to be free and easy.

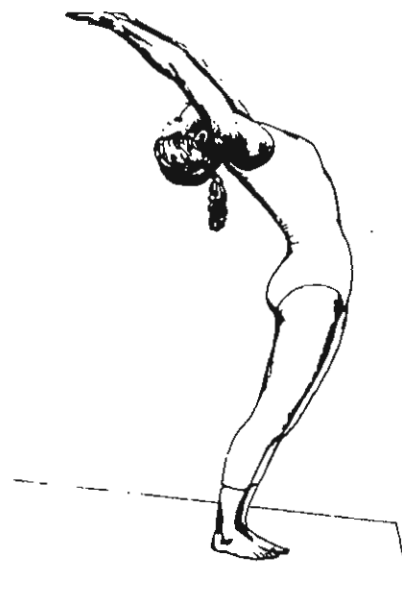


Figure 11. Raised arm position.



Figure 12. Salutation position.

specific structural problems, the posture may be adjusted or changed in order to be more effective and to serve one's particular requirement. In any of these special cases, please check with a qualified yoga instructor.

I. TONING-UP EXERCISES (1 to 2 minutes)

We begin with a few exercises that invigorate and tone the body. The first exercise consists of progressively massaging the body with the hands and fingers, moving in the direction of the heart.

1. First come to a comfortable sitting position. Using the palms and fingers of both hands, press the top of your head and gradually continue to press and release with the hands moving forward over the face and down the neck and chest. Again start at the top of the head and press the head with the palms and fingers moving down and over the back of the neck, coming around to the chest.



Figure 1. Toning-up exercise, head.

2. To tone the hands and arms, begin by massaging the right side first. Grasp the fingers of the right hand with your left hand and continue to press and release upward along the top of the right arm all the way to the shoulder and across the chest. Repeat by pressing and releasing along the underside of the right arm, from the hand up to the forearm, shoulder, and chest. Your pressure should be firm and the massage should be gradual and continuous. Repeat on the left side, making sure to massage both the top and underside of the arm.



Figure 2. Toning-up exercise, hands.

3. Bring the tips of the fingers to your navel and with both hands on the belly, begin to press and release around the abdomen, gradually moving the pressure up to the heart.

4. Massage by pressing and releasing your lower back, kidney area, and ribs, moving up toward the heart.

5. Start with the right foot, grasping and massaging the toes, soles,

YOGA POSITIONS

Time: 10 to 15 minutes,
moving slowly

Repetitions: 1 set in the morning and 1 set in the afternoon

The following easy poses, which take about 15 minutes to perform, are considered the basic Ayurvedic exercise. A set can be practiced before morning and afternoon meditation, with or without the Sun Salute. These positions are taught as part of the neuromuscular integration program at Maharishi Ayurveda clinics and are comfortable for anyone in good health, regardless of age or previous physical training.

What follows is a specific sequence that begins with toning and warming up the body. The set continues with seated and forward bends, standing postures, inverted poses, backbending postures, twists, a resting pose, and ends with a short breathing exercise. Each of the postures in this sequence has a specific therapeutic effect on the physiology. We will mention a few of the well-known benefits of each pose, as given in the ancient texts.

In general, the toning and warm-up exercises increase circulation and improve blood flow to the entire body. Seated poses help to create stability, proper spinal alignment, and good posture, while the forward bends stimulate digestion, increase the spine's flexibility, and calm the physiology. Backbends create mobility and suppleness in the spine—especially in the upper back—and at the same time are invigorating. Inverted poses stimulate the endocrine system and allow for increased circulation, while twists aid digestion, elimination, and tone the spinal column. All of these postures are succeeded by the resting pose and breathing exercises, which bring increased awareness, orderliness, and balance.

A sequence of postures is important because it first prepares the body in order to warm it up and remove stiffness. It progresses to invigorate, strengthen, and stretch the entire body. This is why it is valuable to practice in an orderly sequence, as each pose is a preparation for the following posture or a counterbalance for the preceding one.

Here are a few guidelines to follow before practicing:

1. Perform the postures slowly, making sure you inhale and ex-

hale, without holding the breath or controlling it in any way. Breathing should be easy, fluid, and continuous.

2. No pain, most gain. If you can't touch your toes without excruciating effort, do not push. Let the knees soften or bend freely. **Never strain or push the body in these exercises.** Hold the postures for a few seconds and then release easily. Movements should be performed slowly and comfortably. Never move in or out of the postures abruptly or bounce in a pose. Use the breath to facilitate the movement.

3. How far should you reach? In each pose, go to the point where you feel the stretch. Just move as far as you easily can without effort. Allow your awareness to naturally go to the area of the body that is being stretched. Don't overextend, force, or overstretch. Sometimes it helps to release or back off completely from the stretch, then easily stretch it again. *Do not forget to breathe!*

4. Over the months you'll notice increased strength, flexibility, and suppleness. So it is not necessary to push the body to reach a desired goal. In fact, these postures are not designed to impose a specific structure on your body, and there is no "ideal" pose. Rather, your progress comes from the integrated functioning of awareness, movement, and breath.

5. All Ayurvedic exercise involves the mind as well as the body. In each exercise, a particular area is stretched. Allow your awareness to naturally go to that area. The softening of the accumulated stress is said to come from letting the attention be on the area of stretch.

For that reason, allow the exercises to have your full attention. Don't play the radio, TV, or even soft music in the background. Just let the mind be easily aware of the body.

6. Wear comfortable, loose clothing. Use a flat, nonslippery surface, but avoid performing these exercises on a bare floor. Rather, use a folded wool blanket, rug, exercise mat, or other semisoft surface.

7. *Note:* It is important to mention that all postures should be adapted to meet the needs of the individual. In certain situations, such as acute illness, pregnancy, menstruation, and



Figure 3. Toning-up exercise, feet.

and tops of the feet, moving up the calves, thighs, hips, and stomach, continuing the motion up toward the heart. Repeat on the left leg, moving up to the hips and continuing all the way to the heart.

6. Lie on your back and lengthen the spine, keeping the head and neck long and free. Bring the knees up to your chest, clasp your hands over the knees, and begin to roll slowly and easily from side to side. Always allow your neck to be relaxed and free. Breathe normally.

7. Roll 5 times to each side and then release the arms and slowly extend your legs out from the hips. Let the body be completely relaxed.

Figure 4. Toning-up exercise, side roll.

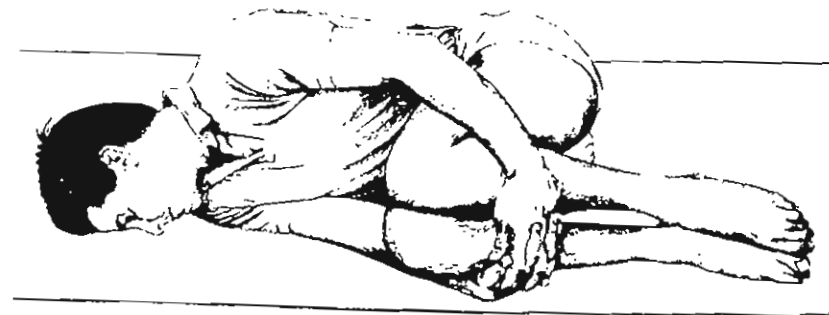


Figure 5. Toning-up exercise, side roll.

II. SEAT FIRMING POSE—*Vajrasana* (30 seconds to 1 minute)

1. Begin by kneeling and sitting with the buttocks on the heels. The feet should be slightly apart and the big toes crossed. Lengthen the spine, widen the rib cage, and slightly lift the chest. The head and neck should be long and free. Look straight ahead and breathe easily. Place your hands in your lap with the right hand on top of the left, palms up.

2. As you inhale, lift the buttocks off the heels and come up to a kneeling position. Keep the spine lengthened and the chest open and lifted. Relax the shoulders. On the exhalation, slowly lower the body and sit back down on the heels. Repeat again smoothly, with even breaths.

3. Move slowly. Breathe deeply and easily, keeping the front and back of your body lively, long, and free.

Benefits: This asana strengthens the pelvic region, removes tension from the knees and ankles, and builds a strong foundation for the back.

III. HEAD TO KNEE POSE—*Janu Sirsasana* (About 1 minute)

1. Sit down and extend your legs straight out in front of you. Stretch through the backs of the legs and heels, toes pointing up toward the head.

EXERCISE



Figure 6. Seat-firming pose, starting position.

Figure 7. Seat-firming pose, erect position.

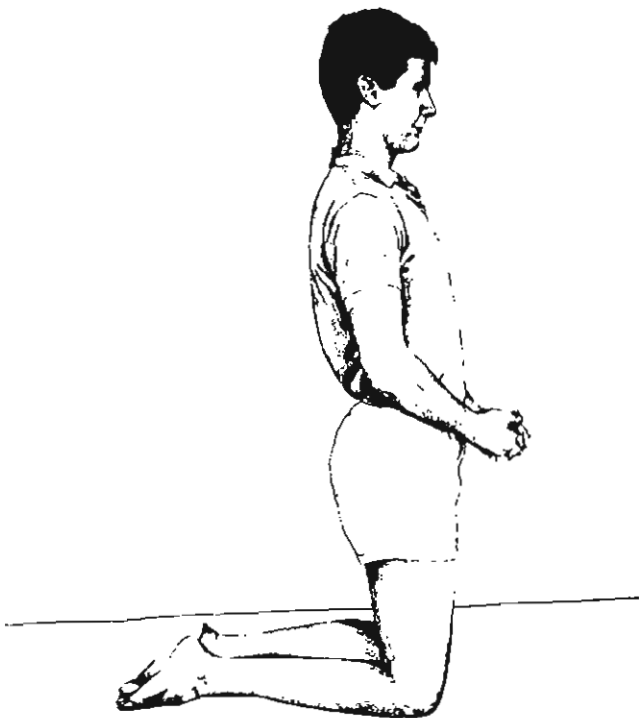


Figure 8. Head to knee pose.

2. Bend the left knee and place the sole of your left foot against the inside of the right thigh.
3. Inhale and lift the arms straight up from the upper back, stretching them over the head. On the exhalation, bend the body forward and down, elongating the spine. Keep lengthening the spine, arms, and neck as you come forward. Avoid collapsing the chest or overrounding the upper back. You may soften the front knee slightly to further release the lower back.
4. Hold the pose for a few breaths. Then inhale and release the arms from the upper back, opening the chest forward and up as you bring your arms over the head. Repeat again on the same side, moving slowly and comfortably. Inhale the body up and exhale as you lower the arms down to the sides.
5. Perform this posture on the other side. Fully extend the left leg in front of you. Bend the right knee and place the sole of the right foot against the inside of the left thigh.
6. Breathe and move into the posture slowly. Exhale as you bend the body forward and down and inhale as you come up. Then repeat the pose again on the same side. Breathe normally and hold for a few breaths without strain. After you come up, exhale and lower the arms down to the sides.

Benefits: This pose strengthens and relaxes the spine, tones the abdomen, liver, and spleen, and aids in digestion.

IV. SHOULDER STAND—*Sarvangasana* (Start by holding for 30 seconds; gradually increase to 2 minutes if you are comfortable in the pose.)

Note of Caution: If you are a beginner or have stiffness or problems in the upper back and neck, practice this posture with one or two blankets placed under the shoulders to protect the neck, or do a half shoulder stand rather than completely straightening the body in the full pose. Perform this posture slowly. If you have a chronic back problem or high blood pressure, be sure to check with your doctor before performing this pose. (Maharishi Ayurveda advises against standing on the head, as it can injure the brain, neck, and spine if practiced improperly.)



Figure 9. Shoulder stand.

1. Lie on your back and press your arms and hands flat against the floor. Relax the shoulders and lengthen the spine.
2. As you exhale, bend the knees and slowly raise the legs over the waist. Push the palms against the floor and swing the knees up and over the head. Bend the elbows, keeping them in toward the body and in line with the shoulders. Support your back with your hands above the hips. The elbows and the shoulders should create a stable platform to support the body.
3. Straighten your legs by lengthening through both heels and the balls of the feet. Allow the spine to stretch up toward the ceiling. Fully stretch your legs out from the hips to keep the body in a straight line from the ankles to the shoulders. Extend the spine upward.
4. If you choose to do the half shoulder stand, don't straighten the body all the way. Support the weight of the body with your hands, while making an angle with the legs. The feet point in the direction of the head. (*Note:* This is a shoulder stand, *not* a neck stand, so there should be no strain in the neck or throat. This is very important.) Keep the breath smooth and let your face relax. Hold the posture for a few breaths, increasing the time you stay in this pose as is comfortable.

Benefits: This asana enlivens the entire endocrine system, increases circulation to the thyroid gland, relieves mental fatigue, brings flexibility to the spine, and has a soothing effect on the body.

V. PLOW POSE—*Halasana* (15 seconds to 1 minute)

1. Continue into this next posture as you exhale and bend from the pelvis to bring both legs down over the head. Keep the legs stretching straight out through the heels so that the legs are at a right angle to the torso. Let the spine lengthen to avoid overcurving the upper back. Keep your breath smooth and continuous.
2. Allow your legs to go back only as far as you feel comfortable, without collapsing the spine or chest. Be careful not to put too much strain on the neck. (If you feel pain, slowly release and come out of the pose.)

EXERCISE

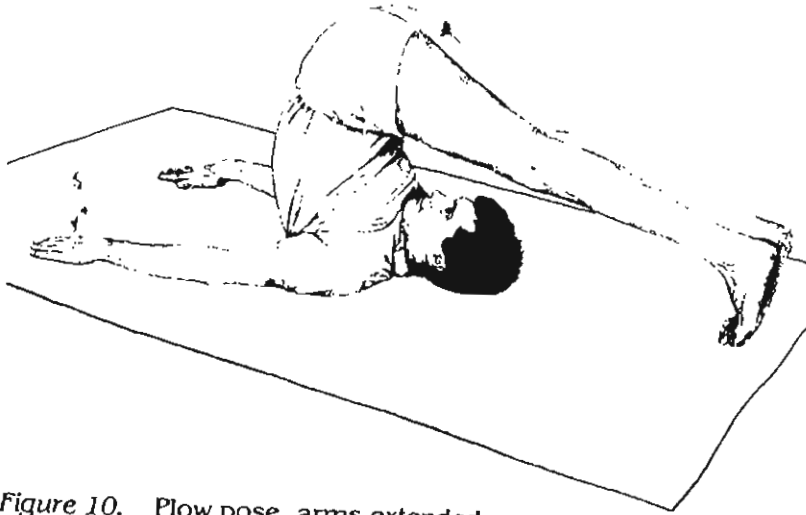
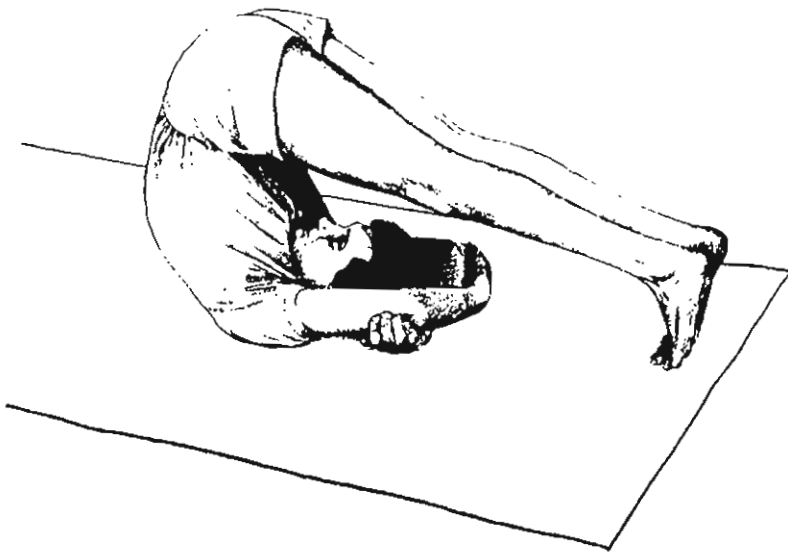


Figure 10. Plow pose, arms extended.



3. Now extend the arms straight out behind you in the opposite direction, away from your legs and head. The torso should rest on the tops of the shoulders, the hips maintaining a vertical line with the shoulder joints. Lengthen your spine.

4. Fold the arms over your head and hold for a few breaths.

5. To come down, exhale, bend your knees, and support the lower back with your hands. Slowly and easily uncurl the spine with the knees bent until you are lying flat. Rest comfortably for a few moments.

6. Be sure to let your breathing be smooth, especially in the Shoulder Stand and Plow. The quality of your breath will be an indication of whether you are straining or pushing too far.

Benefits: The Plow pose strengthens and relaxes the back, neck, and shoulders. It improves performance of the liver and spleen and removes fatigue. Both the Shoulder Stand and the Plow stimulate and normalize functioning of the thyroid gland.

VI. COBRA POSE—*Bhujangasana* (30 seconds to 1 minute)

1. Lie facedown on your stomach, bring the feet together and the hands directly under your shoulders, fingers pointing forward. Slightly elongate the spine to protect your lower back.

2. On the inhalation, lift and expand the chest forward and up as you press down with the hands. Keep your elbows close in to the body and continue to extend the spine upward. Open and widen the chest and move the shoulders down and away from your ears to free the neck and head. Let the upper back widen and lengthen.

3. Hold for a few breaths, then exhale and come down slowly.

4. Repeat the pose 1 to 3 times, beginning with the inhalation and lifting from the chest. Be careful not to initiate this movement from your head or lift the body with your neck. Keep the spine long and breathe normally. Allow your breath to be fluid and easy. Exhale and slowly come down. Let the body relax completely.

Benefits: This pose strengthens the back, stretches the abdominal muscles, and is helpful with uterine and ovarian problems.

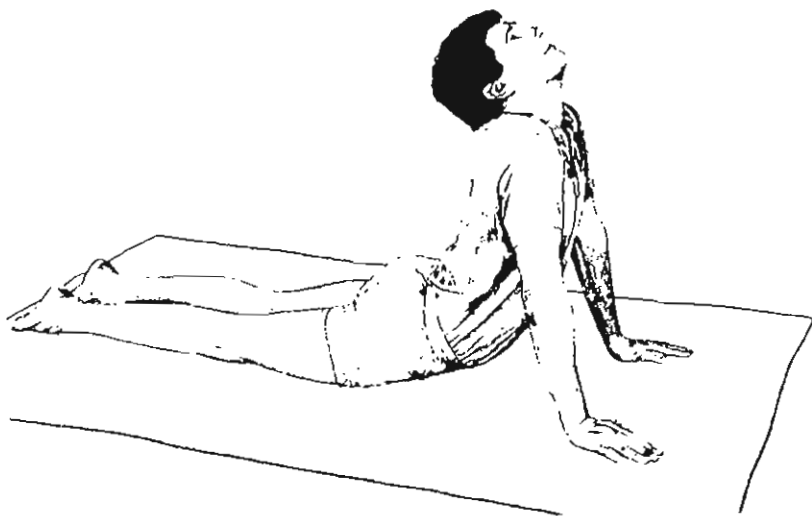


Figure 12. Cobra pose.

VII. LOCUST POSE—*Salabhasana* (30 seconds to 1 minute)

1. Continue to lie facedown and stretch the arms back by your sides, either next to your hips or under the thighs. Face your palms to the ceiling. Bring your feet together and feel the entire back lengthen. Rest your chin gently on the floor.
2. On the inhalation, raise both legs, lengthening them out from your hips. Keep lengthening the entire spine as the legs extend upward and back. Stretch the thighs and keep both legs fully extended and straight. Keep breathing easily, hold for a few breaths, then release the legs down slowly.
3. Repeat the pose 1 to 3 times. Be careful not to hold the breath in this pose. Use the inhalation to lift the legs. Keep lengthening the spine to prevent straining or hyperextending the lower back.



Figure 13. Locust pose.

4. Don't force your body to try to achieve a perfect pose. You may wish to raise one leg at a time, lengthening each leg out from the hips, then progressing to raise both legs at once.

Benefits: This posture strengthens the lower back, aids in digestion, and benefits the bladder, prostate, uterus, and ovaries.

VIII. SEATED TWISTING POSE—*Marichyasana* (About 1 minute)

1. Sit with the legs extended straight out in front of you. Keep the spine lengthened, the head and neck free.
2. Bend your left knee and keep the sole of the foot on the ground. Bring your heel toward the buttocks just above the inner part of the right knee. The inner side of your left foot should touch the inner side of the outstretched right thigh. Actively extend your right leg straight out in front of you, lengthening through the back of your leg and heel.

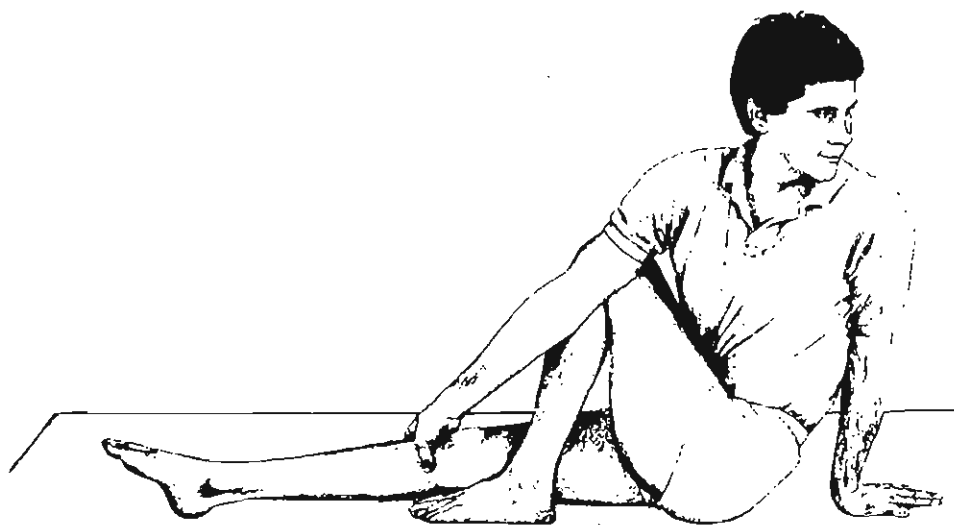


Figure 14. Seated twisting pose.

3. Bring your left hand on the floor behind you, and the right arm on the outside of the left knee. If it is difficult to do this, just grasp the knee with your hand. Inhale, lift the rib cage, lengthen your spine vertically upward, and as you exhale, twist from the base of your spine to the left.

4. As you twist, keep opening the chest to the left and let your head follow the movement of your spine, following in the direction of the twist. Continue to elongate your spine and open your chest as you breathe. Try not to collapse the front of your body. If you can comfortably keep the spine long in this posture, continue to bring the left hand around the back onto the right thigh. Go only as far as you can without strain.

5. Keep breathing normally and hold the pose for a few breaths. Release slowly, then repeat on the other side. It is especially important to use your breath in this pose and to allow the twist to come from the exhalation. Always twist on a lengthened rather than a compressed spine.

Benefits: This posture increases circulation to the abdominal organs, relieves tightness in the shoulders and upper back, stretches the neck, and stimulates the adrenal glands, liver, and kidneys.

IX. STANDING FORWARD BEND— *Uttanasana* (Up to 1 minute)

1. Stand up and bring your feet together in a parallel position, about hip distance apart. Stand evenly on both feet and lengthen the spine as you lift and open your chest. Keep your head and neck long and free. Look straight ahead and breathe normally.

2. Allow your arms to hang loosely at your sides and keep the shoulders relaxed. Look straight ahead and breathe normally.

3. On the inhalation, slowly extend your arms over the head as you lift and expand the chest. On the exhalation, bend the body forward and down, lengthening the entire spine. The arms and head follow in the same line with the spine. Let your knees soften or bend freely and bring your hands to the floor. Keep your elbows and shoulders relaxed and don't lock the knees.

4. Keep breathing easily. Hold the pose for a few breaths. On the inhalation, lift your arms from the upper back as you open the chest forward and up. Come all the way up to a vertical position, arms over your head. Exhale and lower your arms down to the sides.

Benefits: This posture tones the liver, stomach, spleen, kidneys, and spine, and soothes and cools the mind.

X. AWARENESS POSE—*Chitasana* (At least 1 minute)

1. Lie down on your back so that both sides of the spine rest evenly on the floor.

2. Lengthen your legs away from the pelvis and let them fall open to the sides. Release your head, neck, shoulders, and hips. Allow the arms to rest loosely next to the body. Face your palms upward.

3. Now let your body be completely relaxed. Close your eyes and rest for at least 1 minute. Allow the breath to be easy and free.

Benefits: This pose invigorates and refreshes both the body and the mind, removes fatigue, and is soothing for the entire system.



15. Standing forward bend.

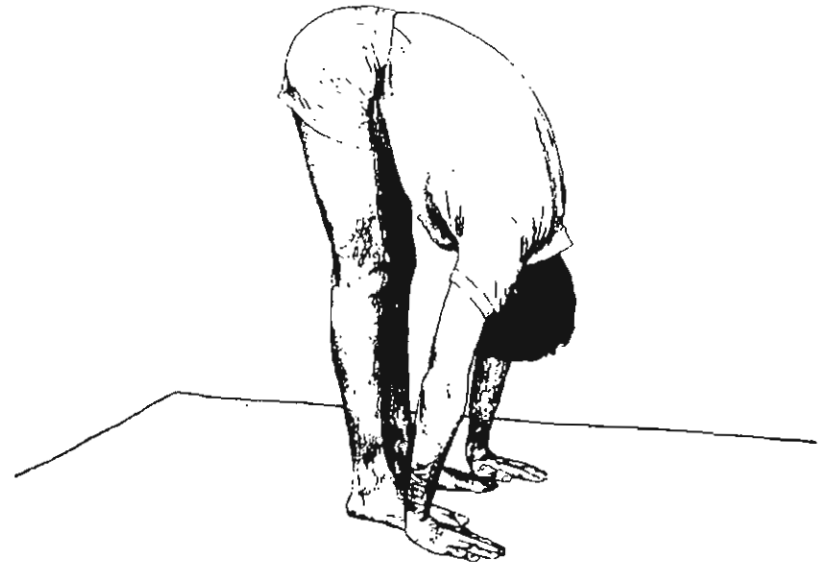


Figure 16. Standing forward bend.

BALANCED BREATHING (*Pranayama*)

Time: 5 minutes

Repetitions: 1 set in the morning and 1 set in the evening

Breathing exercises in Maharishi Ayurveda are a gentle form of balancing the breath—moving from one nostril to the other—a technique called *Pranayama*. Its purpose is to make the respiratory rhythm more regular, which in turn has a soothing effect on the entire nervous system (that is why we call this a “neuro-respiratory” exercise at our clinics). A few minutes of balanced breathing, sitting quietly with eyes closed, is very relaxing; many people feel a pleasant lightness in the head afterward and a warm glow inside. *Pranayama* is the best prelude to meditation, since it effortlessly focuses your attention inward and reduces the scattered thoughts and “noise” that usually fill the mind.

Modern medicine has discovered that brain function is divided between the right and left cerebral hemispheres, each of which contributes its own emphasis. Right-brain activity is intuitive and feeling; left-brain activity is rational and organized. Using the tech-

HOW TO PERFORM BALANCED BREATHING (Pranayama)



Figure 17. Awareness pose.

nique of Pranayama, Ayurveda has found a way to “talk” to both hemispheres and bring them into balance. When the breath becomes more balanced, several things happen: you switch your breathing from the right to the left nostril at regular intervals, your mind becomes more clear and alert, and one side of the body is not noticeably weaker than the other.

We recommend 5 minutes of Pranayama morning and evening every day as part of the ideal Ayurvedic daily routine.

A few pointers before you start:

- Any form of straining must be avoided—if you begin to feel dizzy or start to pant, stop for a moment and sit quietly with your eyes closed until you feel normal again. Do not snort in order to clear a clogged nostril. It is not advised to use antihistamines to open your nose before starting. If allergies or a cold have blocked your sinuses, just skip Pranayama until they clear up naturally.

- It is normal for the mucous membranes to contract when you first learn to do this exercise. Just let them relax. Within a few days, they will adjust normally to the new routine.

- Perform Pranayama in a quiet room without radio, music, or TV. Keep your eyes closed. If you feel anxious at any time, stop the exercise for a minute, but do not get up immediately. Sit quietly with your eyes closed until you feel relaxed again. If the uncomfortable sensation persists, lie down for a few minutes until it passes.

- Never hold your breath or count how many seconds you inhale and exhale. These instructions are sometimes seen in yoga books or are given out by yoga teachers. All such practices run contrary to the purpose of this exercise, which is to allow the body to balance the breath itself. Your natural breathing rhythm is right for you.

Find a comfortable chair that allows you to sit upright with your spine straight and both feet on the floor—it is best not to lounge backward while doing Pranayama. Close your eyes, let your mind rest, and place your right hand in the illustrated position—your thumb goes beside your right nostril, your two middle fingers beside your left nostril.

To perform the exercise, gently close one nostril, then the other, as you breathe normally. To keep your arm from getting tired, it helps to tuck your right elbow in close to your ribs, but don't prop it up on your chair or on a table.

The basic rhythm of Pranayama is:

1. Gently close the right nostril with your thumb and slowly exhale through your left nostril. Inhale easily through your left nostril.

2. Close the left nostril with the two middle fingers and exhale out of the right nostril. Inhale easily through the right nostril.

3. Alternate nostrils for 5 minutes. Then lower your arm and sit back comfortably with eyes closed for 1 or 2 minutes. You can proceed immediately to meditation if that is your next activity.

Note that you *begin each breath on the exhale* and finish on the inhale—this is different from most Western breathing exercises, which begin by taking in a deep breath. In Pranayama, you do not need to take deep breaths. Just let your breathing come naturally but a little slower and deeper than usual. If at any time you feel like breathing through your mouth, go ahead, then return to the exercise as soon as you feel comfortable again. For many people the pattern of breathing changes at times; this is normal and a good sign that you are reaching a more balanced style of respiration.

