



# Yoga for Self Care

Yoga Behind Bars Zine  
Summer/Fall 2020



We care that you care for yourself.



*Yoga Behind Bars is a Seattle-based non-profit that offers adult and youth programs in prisons and jails. We teach yoga and movement informed by student feedback, modern neuroscience, and ancient wisdom traditions. Half of the 40 classes we teach per week in Washington state are led by volunteers and half are led by incarcerated teachers, all trained in trauma-informed yoga instruction.*

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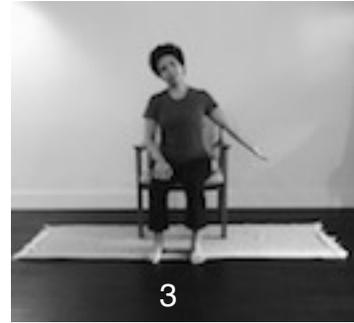


# Chair Yoga Sequence



1. Sit on the edge of a chair or bed with both feet on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap. Palms up encourages more external awareness. Palms down creates a closed circuit and reinforces introspection. Reach both of your sitting bones into your support.

Lengthen through your spine all the way up to the top of your head and down through your tailbone. Relax your thighs and sense the 3 points of your feet (center of your heel, inner and outer edge of the balls of your feet) touching the ground. Begin a practice of Centering Breath.



2. Keep your spine vertical. Tip your left ear to your left shoulder. Take 3 deep breaths. Extend your right arm on a low diagonal to the right. Breathe into the right side of your neck. Now bring your head back to center and relax your arms with your hands in your lap.

3. Repeat on the right side.



4. Stay seated with your feet on the floor. Check that the 3 points of your feet are still connected to the ground. Interlace your hands and stretch your palms to the ceiling, lengthening your arms upward.



5. Lower your arms. Keep your pelvis neutral on your support. Take a deep breath in to lengthen your spine. On your exhale, twist to the left. Place your left hand on the chair or bed and your right hand on your outer left thigh. Take a few breaths here. On your 4th inhale return to neutral.

6. Repeat. Twist to the right.



7. Return your spine to neutral. Relax your arms. Now cross your left ankle over your right knee. You can stay upright in your spine or begin to bow forward with a long spine until you feel a deepening of sensation in your left outer hip. Pause here for 5-10 breaths. Return to neutral with both feet on the floor.

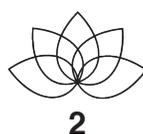
8. Repeat with right ankle.

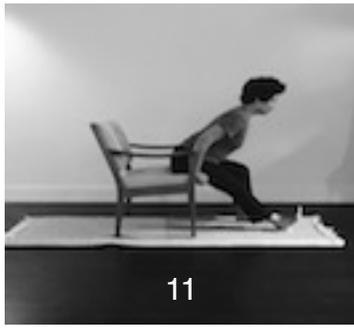


9. Sit in chair tadasana (see photo 1 of this sequence). Place your hands on the sides of the chair or on the bed behind your pelvis. Keep your pelvis rooted and arch your spine to lift your chest. Take 3 breaths. Return to neutral.



10. Place your hands on the sides of the chair or on the bed behind your pelvis. Stretch your left leg forward. Keep your heel on the floor and lengthen your left leg as much as possible. Keep your hands on the chair or bed and bow forward with a long spine.





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11. Repeat with right leg.

12. Bring your spine back to neutral. Keep your feet on the floor. Bow forward placing your hands on the floor or in your lap.

13. Sit upright with feet and knees wide in chair goddess.

14. From chair goddess, side bend to the left. Take 3 breaths. Keep your right side long as you arc your spine to the left.



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15. Repeat side bend to the right.

16. Move back through center and fold forward over goddess legs. Take 5 breaths.

17. Sit in chair tadasana. Hold the back base of your skull, draw your elbows near your temples and lengthen into a backbend. Option: once you are in your backbend, reach your arms alongside your face. Keep your pelvis neutral and find the backbend in your upper spine.

18. Come back to chair tadasana. Scoot all the way to the edge of the seat. Reach your arms alongside your ears and press through the 3 points of your feet. Take as much weight out of your sitting bones as possible and hover for 5-10 breaths. Chair utkatasana will be a stronger holder. Take slow and even breaths.

19. Come back to chair tadasana for 5 breaths and then fold

forward.

20. Move down to the floor. Turn to sit on your left hip in front of your support. Twist toward your seat, stack your forearms and rest your head for 10-15 breaths.

21. Repeat floor twist on the right. Sit with right hip on the ground, in front of your seat and twist toward your support. Take 10-15 breaths.

22. Lie down on your back with your calves resting on your chair or bed. Relax your arms by your sides with palms up. Stay here for up to 10 minutes.

23. Move away from your support (chair or bed). Draw your knees into your chest for apanasana.

24. Extend your arms and legs out on the ground for savasana. Relax, breath and be for 5-20 minutes.



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# YBB Favorite: Body Percussion

This is one of YBB's best practices because it can calm and soothe us, while also bringing blood flow and awareness to numbed or disassociated parts of our bodies.

Use the tips of your fingers, a soft fist, or open palm to gently, yet firmly tap or strike your body in a rhythmic way. This practice does not need to be done in a particular sequence, and nearly any part of the body could be tapped, but be kind to your body and lighten up your touch if anything feels painful or uncomfortable. Some common tapping locations are just under the collarbone and around the chest, around the eyebrows and eyes, and on the arms and shoulders. Helpful imagery can be to imagine heavy raindrops hitting your body.

Tap/strike for 2-5 minutes and complete this practice by imagining wiping water off of your body in long sliding gestures. Notice how you feel.



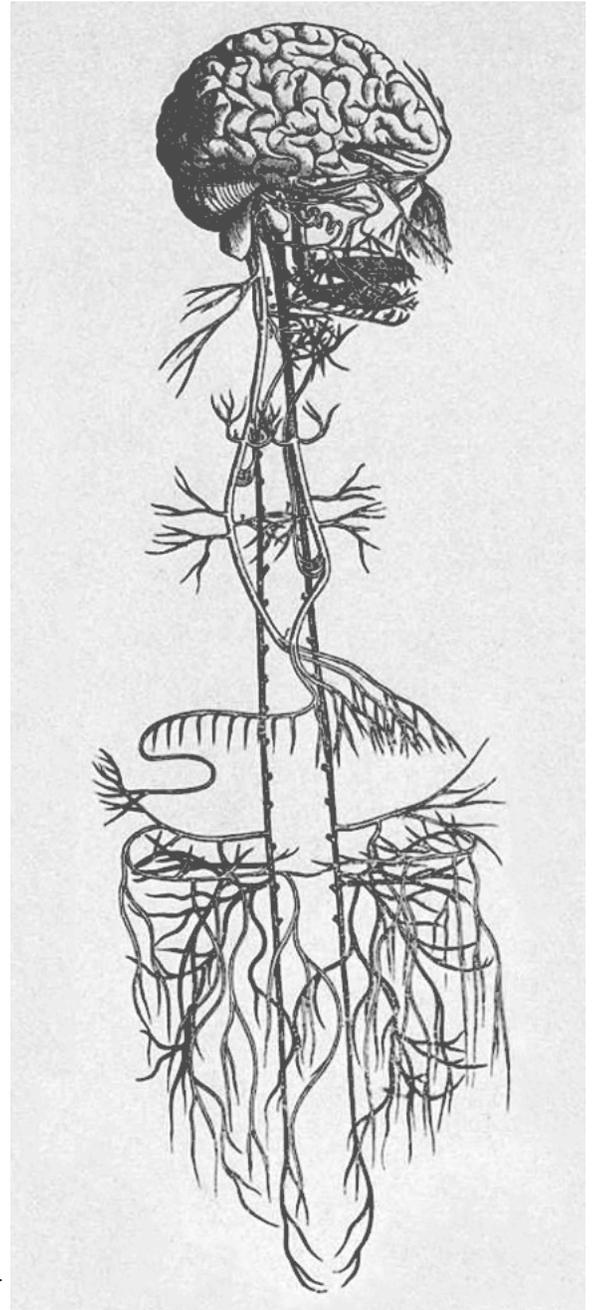
# Yoga, Anxiety, and The Vagus Nerve

The vagus nerve is the largest nerve in the autonomic nervous system, extending from the brain throughout the body. You can't see it, but it's a powerful messenger! It conveys information about the state of the body to the brain – things like, "I'm safe and comfortable," or "I'm in danger, and I need to fight, flee, or freeze." This feeling of anxiety is why our heart starts racing, our digestion might feel funky, or we can't think straight and making good decisions becomes difficult or out of reach.

There are many ways to tone the vagus nerve and communicate signs of safety to the brain. The exercise below is an example that can be easily incorporated into your day to relax the nervous system during times of heightened stress and anxiety.

## Vagal Toning Exercise

- Find a stable and comfortable position: standing, seated, or laying down (if you're laying down, you can interlace your hands behind the base of the skull, elbows wide, arms and neck relaxed).
- With eyes open, gaze straight ahead.
- Without moving or turning your head, shift your gaze of the eyes to the right and focus on a point in front of you: a wall, the ceiling, or an object in the room. Don't move the eyes so far that they strain – your focus should stay soft.
- Leave the eyes there for 1-3 minutes, or until you naturally sigh, yawn, swallow, or feel a deep exhale – try to be patient!
- Switch sides after you feel a response, or after a few minutes. You can do each side two times, as desired. It's okay if you don't feel a response initially. It takes practice!
- Take a moment to blink, lower your gaze, or close your eyes. Notice how you feel: breath, heart rate, muscle tension, tiredness, or overall state of being.



# Meditations

## Lightstream Meditation

5 minute practice

You can do this meditation in any posture. Try to get as comfortable as you can. Close your eyes or lower your gaze and imagine that there is light coming down from the sky, passing between the clouds, and touching down on the top of your head. You can let this light be any color, and perhaps give it a temperature as well. Slowly, imagine that this light spreads across your body, eventually all the way to your toes, so that your whole body is basking in it. Let it blot out any distress and worry. Then slowly let it fade and notice how you feel. Complete with three deep breaths.



## Loving Kindness

5-10 minute practice

Find a comfortable position, seated or laying down. With your eyes closed or lowered, begin to focus on your breath. Deepen your breath, and notice how your body feels as it slows. Begin to imagine with every inhale, inviting in kindness and love; with every exhale, imagine letting go of negativity and anger.

When you feel settled in your breath, you can say the following to yourself:

May I live with ease, may I be happy, may I find comfort in times of pain.

Imagine someone you love, who you want to show and give your care:

May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you find comfort in times of pain.

Imagine someone or something with whom you feel tension, anger, or discomfort:

May they live with ease, may they be happy, may they find comfort in times of pain.

You can bring the message back to yourself as you wrap up your meditation. Release your breath, letting go of any effort. Notice how you feel in your body and mind.



# Note from a YBB teacher...

Kindness and compassion are necessary when we notice the many different aspects of our own being and all the various experiences we may be having at one time. Feeling the loss of life before the pandemic, missing family, missing the ease of moving about the world. Even missing my commute! I am feeling all of this in my body as a heaviness in my limbs, a thickness in my head, an ache in my upper back and intermittent tears. Emotions are called feelings because we feel them in our bodies first!

At the same time, I have been enjoying the new rhythm of my life in a slower and smaller place. (I have recently moved to a new town.) I am grateful for my work and the technology that allows me to continue to support and serve others. And I acknowledge that I still have way more ease in moving around in the world than many if not most folk.

All this is to say, we are never just one thing...a singular emotion, one quality of heart, one thought, or all pain. We are complex and multi-faceted beings that easily get caught up in the most obvious or loudest inner voice or physical sensation. Honoring this complexity by learning how to hold ourselves loosely and being able to shift our awareness to attend to different and perhaps more subtle sensations and experiences is the practice of Presence.

This is not about dismissing the difficulties or pain with a curt "It's all Good!"...because it's not all good. Not by a long stretch. We need to feel the pain and grief, let it move through us, so it can have its turn and then dissipate. Then that energy is released back into the system for more presence in the moment and ability to act going forward. Part of what allows us to do this without getting overwhelmed and stuck is not ignoring the continued presence of beauty and moments of simple ease.

It is the practice of both/and instead of either/or. It is the practice of being bigger than the parts, and still feeling the parts themselves. It is the ability to hold paradox and sit with the terrible beauty of life. This is what is being asked of us by life and all the spiritual paths. To be present to the unity and the multiplicity all at once.

## Practice Prompts:

- Take a few minutes to practice a soft gaze or close your eyes and soften your inner ear. Whichever sense you choose to explore, allow the images/sounds to arrive and land in you rather than reaching out to get them. Noticing all the various things that presence simultaneously.
- Practice open attention. This could be a formal meditation or a simple awareness throughout your day. Simply keep dilating your awareness in wider and softer circles. Keep opening up to the inquiry of "what else?"
- When in pain see if you can notice any other part of you that is less painful or more at ease. Pause and notice this place, hang out there for awhile and see what happens when you return your attention to the pain. Play with going back and forth a few times slowly.

