

Health Insights Today

A SERVICE OF CLEVELAND CHIROPRACTIC COLLEGE

Summer 2009, Volume 2, Issue 3

The Yoga of Transitions

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My office windows afford me a tantalizing view of nature waking up from its winter rest. The grass is greening and I imagine its lush feel between my toes. Buildings I've been able to see at a distance throughout the winter daily disappear further into the returning foliage. And just below my west window are three lovely redbud trees that have delighted me with their brightness on days both sunny and gray. Indeed, when I am asked why I live in the Midwest and tempted to respond that I'm just not sure, recalling this time of year reminds me what I love about this region.

Harmonizing with Nature's Rhythms

Nature has so much to teach us about the rhythms of life – about our need for rest, preparation, blossoming forth, harvesting the fruits of our efforts, and retreating to stillness for a season. These are challenging lessons for me, and, I suspect, for others in our fast-paced, externally focused world. I find that nature's lessons are often most accessible to me in the transitional times – spring and fall. While there are clearly lessons to be learned during the long, hot days of summer or in the stark, seemingly lifeless days of winter, spring and fall are a riot of color, fragrance, activity. Their lessons are more obvious. And, potentially, more destabilizing. In her book, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, Kathleen Norris describes the unsettling nature of spring this way, "When I lived in South Dakota, I inevitably became depressed as winter shifted into spring. The longed-for moment arrived when the air was gentle and inviting and I could again walk out of doors without heavy clothing. But that also meant stirring things into life that had grown comfortably dormant. Every year I was severely tempted to stay inside, hosting an internal winter and allowing my garden to languish as the perennial flowers and herbs contended with encroaching weeds ... I am surprised that no one has yet coined 'FOS syndrome' for the fear of spring."¹

Ebb and Flow

Yoga philosophy and practice embraces the natural rhythms of life – its ebb and flow. In times of instability and transition, our yoga practice can serve as a grounding force for us. This is especially meaningful during springtime, the time of planting. Just as we prepare the soil to receive seeds that will ultimately produce plants that nourish our bodies, our yoga practices prepare our bodies and energies to sustain us through our life experiences. Spring is thus a potent time to practice yoga.

Asana practices to favor in this time of transition include the Sun Salutation, which honors the centrality of the sun in transforming basic elements into the food that nourishes us. Standing postures connect us powerfully to the earth and teach us the importance of rooting down in order to grow strong and flexible. Adding standing balance postures to a practice can engender both courage and playfulness, two qualities that are extremely useful in navigating life's ever-changing seas.

Breath as a Steady Influence

Pranayama can be extremely helpful when life circumstances seem unsteady. *Pranayama* is generally translated as breath control, but the yogic meaning is far richer. It is more rightly understood as the control of one's vital energy, or even the extension of one's vital energy.² At a time when the energy of the world around us is shifting from dormancy to life, we also feel our own energy shift. A conscious *pranayama* practice during this shift can aid us in channeling our increased energy so that it serves us rather than overwhelms us.

One of the most profound (and yet simplest) *pranayama* techniques is called *Samavrttii*. For this breath practice, we seat ourselves comfortably, rooting down through the ischial tuberosities (the bones on which we sit) into a cushion

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or mat. We lengthen the spine from its base in the bowl of the pelvis through the crown of the head. The head is held directly over the chest; the ribs are stacked over the pelvis. The hands may be placed with the palms facing down onto the thighs or left open. The eyes are gently closed and the breath is drawn in and released through the nostrils only. *Samavritti* means equal fluctuations, so in this *pranayama*, we simply match the length of the inhale to the length of the exhale. For most of us, our inhalations are shorter than our exhalations, so this *pranayama* requires that we consciously lengthen our inhale (without creating strain in the shoulders, chest or face). Begin by inhaling for three counts and exhaling for three counts. As you develop skill at the practice, lengthen to six counts and then nine. Do not strain to achieve a particular length of breath. Do nine cycles of *Samavrittii* and then return to normal breathing.

Once you are comfortable with *Samavritti*, you may wish to try *Nadi Sodhana*, another *pranayama* technique that is grounding and balancing. In this practice, you will use your right hand to manipulate the nostrils as you inhale and exhale.

1. Seat yourself as for *samavritti*.
2. Turn the right hand palm up and bend the index and middle fingers at both knuckles so that the tips of these two fingers rest on the pads of the fingers.
3. Lift the right hand up to the nose without raising the shoulders and place the right thumb on the right side of the nose and the right ring finger (with the pinky finger placed against it) on the left side of the nose.
4. Before beginning the *pranayama* practice, slide both the thumb and index finger down the nose to the indentation between the cartilage and the fleshy edges of the nostrils. Place a slight pressure on this portion of the nose and notice that you can impede the flow of air in and out of the nostrils.
5. Use the ring finger (with the pinky finger placed against it) to close the left nostril. Inhale through the right nostril.
6. Close the right nostril with the right thumb while simultaneously opening the left nostril by releasing the pressure with the right ring finger. Exhale through the left nostril.
7. Inhale through the left nostril. Close the left nostril with the right ring finger while simultaneously opening the right nostril by releasing the pressure in the right thumb. Exhale through the right nostril. At this point, you've completed one cycle (inhale right, exhale left, inhale left, exhale right).
8. Repeat this cycle 6–9 times without straining, raising the shoulders, or tilting the head to one side. Then, release the right hand and breathe normally for several cycles.

At its most fundamental, yoga is about union; it seeks to restore our connection with our bodies, our minds, our breath, and our world. *Asana* and *pranayama* are practices with the potential to ground and reconnect us as the world around us comes alive again after winter and invites us to do the same. Much of what we like to do in the spring, however, can rightly be called yoga. Planting our spring garden may be our yoga practice for the day. So may taking a walk in the early morning or a run at dusk. When we enjoy these activities, we are outside, breathing fresh air, feeling the pulse of the earth beneath our feet and hands, able to see and participate with the rebirth that is all around us. Whatever your yoga practices are, may they serve to connect you to the transformational potential of spring.

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