



## Yoga for spring cleansing

*As spring ushers in warmth and light, discover the sense of freedom and greater awareness that comes with taking your yoga practice outdoors.*

Words Jessie Chapman

Spring is a time when we turn off the heaters and pack away the doonas, cosy dinners are replaced by picnics in the park and soaks in a warm bath are replaced by refreshing ocean swims. It is also the time when we're naturally drawn to being outside and experiencing the cleansing power of nature; the mornings are lighter earlier, we're able to get out of bed with less resistance, the warming sun relaxes the body and the soft tissue becomes more forgiving.

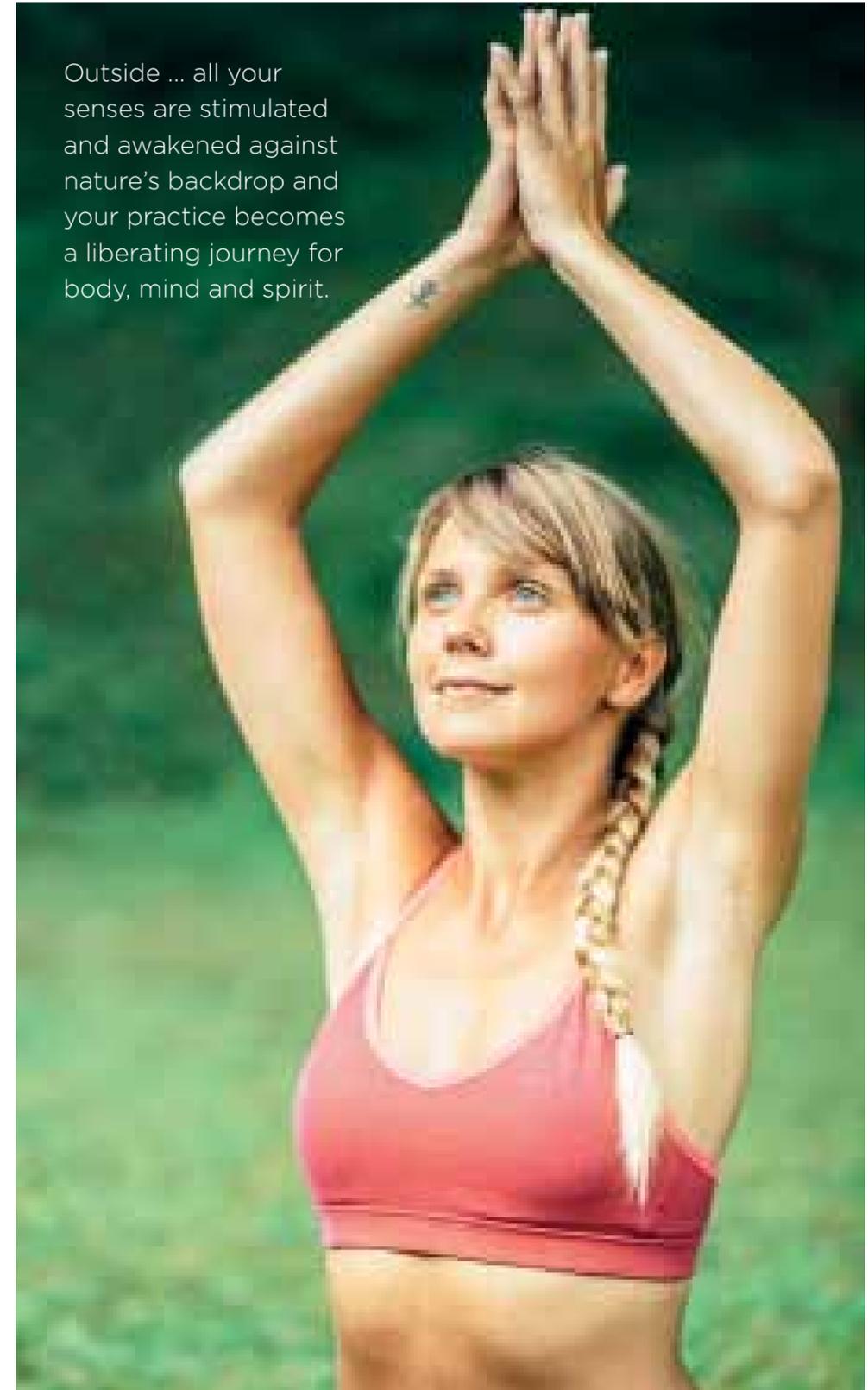
As the desire to be outside increases, it is also more comfortable to explore yoga outdoors. Nature is a very conducive setting for yoga practice, as you can often feel more inspired in the fresh air and among the elements. The word "inspire" literally means "to breathe in" and is derived from the action of taking in spirit (*in-spir-it*). When you breathe fresh oxygenated air, your intake of *prana* — the healing life-force energy that permeates the atmosphere and

your whole being — increases. Through regular yoga practice, you aspire to be healthy of body and mind and to live with greater awareness. By practising yoga outside, you're already in a healthy environment and you're cultivating awareness through simply connecting with nature.

Outside, the boundaries of a formal classroom setting and the rubber yoga mat are transformed into limitless space. All your senses are stimulated and awakened against nature's backdrop and your practice becomes a liberating journey for body, mind and spirit. The "yoga room" may now be the soft grass beneath your feet, the shade of a beautiful tree, an endless stretch of sand with the constant rhythm of crashing waves or a flat water-beaten rock beneath a cleansing waterfall.

Most yoga *asanas* (postures) reflect a quality of nature or the energy of an animal so, when you're outside, your awareness and understanding of these qualities naturally expands and you

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can experience the essence of the asanas with greater ease. Through the body and the breath, you understand the original purpose and meaning of the asanas; their traditional wisdom and practical healing benefits are revealed through nature's presence and your growing awareness.

In dynamic standing postures, you experience connection with the Earth as your feet yield to it. Standing tall in *tadasana* (mountain pose), gazing softly towards a mountainous horizon, you're reminded of the solidity and grounded nature of the mountain's form, and you can draw on this to build your own stability. Practising *vrksasana* (tree pose) under a grand old tree opens your awareness to the qualities of strength, flexibility, timeless beauty and life's transformational journey.

You experience more grace and lightness when hovering in *bakasana* (crane pose) if a flock of seagulls cruises by or if an eagle soars powerfully above while you're wrapped in *garudasana* (eagle pose). Practising *surya namaskar* (salute to the sun) while facing towards the rising sun moves the spirit to deep gratitude and shows us that nature is both birth and destruction and that life is about creating and letting go. Lying on the ground in *savasana* (corpse pose or lifeless body pose) deeply enhances your understanding of yielding and surrendering.

Make time in your week to get outside and practise yoga. Allow nature to be your guide and draw from the energy of the day. If it's warm outside, find some shade and practise sitting forward-bending postures, shoulder stands and poses for relaxation. If there's a chill in the air, get your inner fires burning with dynamic standing and backward-bending postures.

If you're feeling overwhelmed and mentally or physically exhausted, invert your legs up the trunk of a supportive tree and allow your heart to rest. If



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your mind is dull and unmotivated, flow through five or more *surya namaskars* while facing the rising sun, and focus on taking in new life with each inhalation and letting go of all that no longer serves you in life with each exhalation.

Be creative. The more you explore the possibilities of yoga outside, the more you discover that yoga can be practised anywhere, any time and that the only real limitation is your own mind.

Braving the elements also has a wonderful effect on the psyche. You feel more connected with your body, you become accustomed to cold and heat, and you discover that your body naturally knows how to keep you warm and cool you down when needed. As you begin to tune into the way your body works, you cultivate an inner awareness and a deeper sense of personal power and you're motivated to stay fit and healthy.

#### Tips for yoga outdoors

- Find a place where you feel comfortable and take off your shoes.
- A flat surface is ideal for correct bodily alignment; however, uneven surfaces or a sandy beach will build balance and inner strength. Be creative.
- Being in the shade is ideal to avoid discomfort and distraction; however, early-morning practice to the rising sun is an inspiring setting.
- If your "yoga space" is noisy, don't be put off: use it as a chance to focus inwards more and cultivate inner stillness.
- You've seen others doing yoga outside and how peaceful it looks. Don't be shy and hopefully you'll inspire others with your practice.
- Some yoga schools now offer seasonal outdoor yoga in parks, so find out if there is such a school near you.



Extended triangle pose



Chair pose



Balancing stick pose



### A SEQUENCE FOR SPRING

The following asana sequence will deeply tone, strengthen and shape your whole body; massage and cleanse the internal organs; assist the body's natural cleansing and detoxification process; and give you more energy and inspiration. Practise with breath awareness and only do what feels right for you.

#### Extended triangle pose (utthita trikonasana)

Awaken stiff legs and tight hips in this deeply toning standing posture — a great pose to counteract sitting or driving for long periods. When sitting for too long, your hip flexor muscles can often shorten and tighten; *trikonasana* opens and stretches deep into these hip and leg muscles. With regular practice, your legs become strong and shapely, your ankles strengthen, and a sense of balance and groundedness is found.

Stand with your legs about a leg's length apart, arms extended out to the sides. Turn your left foot out 90 degrees and your right foot in 45 degrees. Inhale, lift and lengthen out of the hips; exhale and extend over to the left, placing your left hand on your ankle or wherever you can reach. Keep your right arm reaching upwards. Keep both legs straight and firm, lifting kneecaps and thighs. Focus on opening the hips to the front, rotating the chest around and up to the sky, and feel your whole body engaged and alive! Stay for five to 10 breaths. Inhale to release then change sides.

**Modifications:** Bend your front leg if there is tightness in your hamstrings. Put your right hand on your right hip for stability. Look down at your left foot if there is neck strain and for balance.

#### Chair pose (utkatasana)

This posture deeply tones the abdominal and back muscles, creating core stability.

The legs, ankles and knees are made strong and stable. Holding the posture for five to 10 breaths, you'll feel your inner leg muscles burning intensely as their strength builds — great for those with weak legs.

Stand with your feet together. Inhale, then, as you exhale, bend your knees to come into a mid-air squat with your thighs parallel to the ground. Extend your arms upward, palms together, and keep them behind the line of your ears. Focus on squatting deeper, keeping your back straight and your buttocks tucked in. Gaze softly forwards at eye level. Stay here for a good five to 10 breaths before releasing up, resting and repeating.

**Modifications:** Keep your palms shoulder width apart if needed.

#### Balancing stick pose (ubhaya padangusthasana)

You must be still and focus deeply inwards to find your balance and maintain it in this posture. When you achieve this, a well of new potential opens, bringing lightness and ease to your practice and a new perspective on life. Here, the back and abdominal muscles are toned, building strength and core stability.

Seat yourself evenly on both your right and left sit bones. Bend your knees and catch hold of your big toes with your first two fingers. Inhale, then, as you exhale, begin to extend your legs upwards so that your arms and legs are straight and dynamic. Have your legs a little more than hips' width apart, keep your back straight and gaze softly upwards. Stay here for five to 10 breaths with a focus on keeping your body still.

**Modifications:** If there is tightness in your hamstrings, keep your legs bent as needed or try extending only one leg at a time.

Half lord of the fishes pose



#### Half lord of the fishes pose (ardha matsyendrasana)

In this asana, the liver, spleen and abdominal organs are massaged and cleansed, helping to release toxins and overcome fatigue and general sluggishness from poor diet and lack of exercise. This asana also relieves a stiff back and shoulders. Practise it when you need more energy and inspiration in your day.

From a sitting position with your legs extended outwards, fold your left leg back so you are sitting on your left foot. Place your right foot on the outer side of your left leg, keeping your right knee upright. From this position, begin to rotate and twist your spine. Place your right hand behind you for stability. Inhale, raise your left arm up and lean forward to lock your left elbow in front of your right knee. Lifting from the base of your spine, begin to twist to your right and gaze over your right shoulder as you turn. Be here for five to 10 breaths, using the inhalation to lift and lengthen the spine and the exhalation to turn and twist deeper. Release and change sides.

**Modifications:** If you can't balance with your buttocks on your left foot,

slide your left foot to the right more so that your buttocks are on the ground. If you can't lock your left elbow in front of your right knee, simply wrap your left arm around the front of your right knee and hold your right thigh. Look to the side, or forwards if there is neck strain.

#### Noose pose (pasasana)

Today, it seems that squatting and resting the feet comfortably on the ground where they belong has become more and more difficult. With the use of chairs, cars and toilet seats (as opposed to squat toilets), we've managed to create distance from the Earth. With this asana, you reconnect with your roots. The ankles are made flexible, the legs toned and the abdominal organs massaged and cleansed.

Squat with your feet together. If your heels don't come to the ground, place them on a folded blanket. Place your right hand on the ground beside you; inhale and raise your left arm up, exhale and turn to lock your left elbow over your right knee, twisting to the right. Focus on sitting deeper back into your heels. Stay here, developing the twist with the breath. If possible, join your hands behind

Mountain pose



your back. Rest here for as long as it is comfortable, developing the twist.

**Modifications:** This posture requires (and builds) good balance. Use a blanket under your heels for stability if needed.

#### Mountain pose (parvatasana)

Here, your arms are deeply toned, as you're made to keep your chest lifted and your spine elongated. To stay here with stillness and ease, you must cultivate energy within; find inner strength and overcome the yearning to collapse. This simple seated position therefore becomes a storehouse of willpower and strength.

Sit in a cross-legged position or with your buttocks resting on your heels, knees together and back straight. Inhale to raise your arms over your head, bringing your palms together. Exhale to bend your elbows out to the sides and create a diamond shape with your arms. Keep your shoulders dropped but your ribs and arms lifted. Stay here for 10 breaths, your eyes gazing softly forwards, facial muscles relaxed and buttocks resting firmly back into your heels.

**Modifications:** Place a blanket between your buttocks and heels if needed. ♪