

Gentle Yoga[®]

with Naomi



"Making yoga accessible to
anyone of any size at any age"

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The information contained in this book is not intended to serve as a replacement for professional medical advice. Please consult with your physician before beginning any exercise program.

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Introduction

Some years ago, while living in New York City, I was looking for a place to go for a much needed vacation. A friend told me about a Yoga Ashram on Paradise Island in the Bahamas. On a whim, I went. It was called the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center and I hoped no one would ask me to pronounce it! For four days we ate healthy foods, practiced yoga and experienced deep relaxation and meditation, an integral part of the practice of yoga. After those few short days I felt like a new person! I found deep calm and inner peace that I could tap into whenever I felt the need. Yoga was definitely what I needed for my own mental health. As I continued my studies in various Yoga Centers, I learned that yoga was developed thousands of years ago by monks to facilitate and insure harmony in the body and mind. The focus and concentration on spinal flexibility and breathing help create a calm nervous system. No wonder it felt so good!

Having used yoga to stop smoking and not gain any weight, I knew it worked. I determined to make yoga a meaningful part of my life and went on to teach others how to reach a calm, relaxed state of being. Writing and compiling a guide for students has been only part of my effort to reach as many of you as possible with the benefits of yoga.

This manual contains instructions for the various postures and movements, along with notations of helpful hints, explanations and advice to enable you to intelligently and confidently practice Gentle Yoga.

Following this introduction is a brief discussion of the purpose of yoga, i.e. what this discipline was actually designed to accomplish. Along with this background information, I have included “Nine Reasons to Practice Gentle Yoga” and “Six Keys to Health and Happiness,” which serve as guidelines to point you to achieving greater physical, mental and spiritual health.

Once you understand *what* and *why* you are practicing (and why you should study Gentle Yoga), I will begin a step-by-step description of a typical Gentle Yoga practice, breaking it down posture by posture. When you have completed the *asana* (posture) portion of the practice, you will move into and through the Deep Relaxation. Included with the instructions for each movement or posture are comments on why a pose is done a certain way, and the benefits derived from each movement.

The Purpose of Gentle Yoga

Gentle Yoga represents an adaptation of the traditional Hatha Yoga poses. It makes a routine available, accessible and doable for **any** size, age and physical condition.

The whole purpose of Gentle Yoga is movement: the more you move, the more you will be able to move. You don't need to hurt yourself in the interim trying to get into a stretch the way it's "supposed" to be done. The premise of Gentle Yoga is that a little is better than nothing, so it really doesn't matter if you have a full range of motion at the outset. Gentle Yoga postures are not only a series of physical positions, but also exercises in mental awareness. The yogi (yoga practitioner) is deliberate in every movement, feeling every muscle. Only through conscious awareness of one's body can tensions be felt. Once felt, they can be eliminated by a systematic yoga program.

The gentle yoga postures are very different from physical exercise. They emphasize relaxation as well as awareness of tension. It is *resting* in the pose with deep breathing that develops the physical health and calms the system. One must never strain or use force to reach the prescribed position.

Physical health, however, also has an effect on the mind and does create certain attitudes. For example, anxiety can induce tense stomach muscles; a bent spine or slumped shoulders may be a sign of resignation or depression. A stubborn attitude may cause one's neck to tighten up while anger or upset may cause the breath to quicken and the heart to race.

Therefore, changing an aspect of the physical can deeply affect the mental state. Yoga postures, which emphasize breathing and relaxation, improve physical health, help to stabilize the emotions and create positive mental attitudes. The postures also promote the free flow of energy throughout the nervous system. They assist in the elimination of toxins and poisons from the joints and other body parts where these foreign elements tend to settle, sometimes permanently. Yoga postures exert a beneficial pressure on various glands and internal organs, flushing and stimulating them. Even *a little practice* can produce amazing improvements in general health.

The core of Gentle Yoga includes relaxation in between poses. Most importantly, with the completion of a yoga session there is a progressive relaxation in which all parts of the body are tightened and then released, creating the feeling of renewal and rejuvenation in the body/mind/spirit. From this state, a deep healing can begin; this is the basis for refreshing and long-lasting benefits to the entire system.

Practice Overview

Overall structure of a Gentle Yoga practice: The following poses will be expanded upon in the upcoming text. First, warm up the spine by working the lower half of the body; while lying on your back, do the spinal twists and leg raises. Next, come up to a seated position for eye, neck and shoulder exercises as well as face and upper body massage. Continue in a seated position and massage the lower body, one leg at a time. Then, you can go into one of the following:

- Cat Stretches on all fours
- Frog Position
- Kamaudi's Pose

With the body all stretched, the options are:

- Standing Pose
- Wall Stand
- Seated Spinal Twist.

After the Yoga Mudra, go into the Deep Relaxation and finish with the closing Alternative Serenity Prayer or prayer of your choice.

Getting Started

1. HOW TO SET THE STAGE FOR YOUR PRACTICE

One of the benefits of Gentle Yoga is that you are moving slowly enough to notice differences in the stretches and how each part of your body feels in every stretch. You may notice how one side of the body accepts a stretch easier than the other side. This helps you to support yourself in getting in touch with your body.

A good body work-out is from top to bottom.

It is always a personal choice as to whether or not to use music. I have always used calming, reflective music (see Resources page for my personal choice).

The Gentle Yoga with Naomi video can be used as a companion to this manual, and is a good demonstration of the flow and how to go from top to bottom of the body. Viewing it before reading this manual will give you an idea of how to sequence your poses.



2. HOW TO BREATHE

Lie down. This is very calming and helps you focus on your breathing. Before doing any poses, start with lying on the floor, relaxing and breathing. Do that for at least five minutes and then progress to a sitting position.

There are several crucial things you need to understand about the importance of breathing correctly. In Sanskrit, the term for "breath" is *prana*, which actually means "life force". Air contains the life force. When you are breathing, you want to breathe in as much of the life force as you can. The reason you breathe through the nose is that the nose has hair which filters impurities out of the air, and it warms the breath as it comes into the body. The nose has passages that directly connect to the brain, thus bringing life force and oxygen to the brain.

- **Sit in a comfortable position. Put your right hand on your abdomen and your left hand over your heart.** This allows you to feel the movement and you can feel if your abdomen is moving correctly.
- **Close your eyes.**
- **Inhale and exhale.** Repeat as necessary.

Make sure you are sitting up straight. Make sure your shoulders are relaxed and that your abdomen is moving in and out. Put a book or pillow on your abdomen if this helps you to notice what's going on with your breathing.



3. THE WARM-UPS

Lie on your back:

- **Stretch your arms up alongside your ears, then stretch your legs.** This is a natural way to line up your spine.
- **Stretch your right arm and right leg. Stretch your left arm and left leg.**
- **Stretch your right arm and left leg. Stretch your left arm and right leg.**
- **Rotate your ankles and wrists; reverse the rotation direction.**

This limbers up the joints.

Next:

- **Lower your hands and take a mini-relaxation.** (visualize and pretend)
- **Tighten your right toes and raise your right leg up about six inches off the floor.**
- **Slowly, drop your leg.**
- **Tighten your left toes and raise your left leg up.**
- **Lower your leg.**
- **Squeeze your buttocks, lift them off the floor.**
- **Make tight fists with your hands, squeeze your shoulders up to your ears, make a tight prune face and release.**
- **Relax completely.**
- **Open your mouth as wide as you can. Wiggle your jaw and run your tongue around your lips and gums and relax your face and jaw.**

The last move relaxes the neck and jaw muscles. You may start yawning. You are simply responding to the extra oxygen you have been taking in. You know by this that you are breathing correctly, that your body is doing its job, and you are relaxing more deeply.

For the neck:

- **Interlace your fingers and place them behind the base of your skull.**
- **Point your toes up, inhale, and on the exhale, bring your head up to look at the toes. Then slowly bring your head back down.**

This brings the neck completely forward to release tension in the neck and shoulders. Pointing the toes up helps to tone and firm the legs.



4. LOWER BACK POSES & HIP OPENERS

This first set of poses help with the lower back. Find a way to do the pose comfortably so that it works for you.

A. Knees to the Chest (Spinal Twist)

You want to warm up the spine before you get into the seated movements. While you are still lying on your back:

- **Bring your arms out at shoulder height with palms down. Make a “T” with your body.**
- **Bring both knees in to your chest; lower both knees to your right, looking to your left and taking a deep breath.**
- **Bring both knees back to center .**

Then do the reverse side.