

WELCOME!

About The Essential Low Back Program:

This program is based on the largest, most definitive scientific study about the use of yoga therapy for the treatment of chronic lower back pain to date. The study was funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH) and published in the ¹*Annals of Internal Medicine* in December, 2005. The 12-week program examined how participants who suffered with non-specific lower back pain responded to yoga therapy when compared with two control groups: a conventional exercise program developed by a Physical Therapist and a third group who was given a self-care book on lower back health to read.

The yoga and exercise group met once a week for 90-minute sessions and were encouraged to practice daily in the interim. The yoga participants experienced a **78% of the yoga participants had a significant reduction in pain levels**, compared with 63% in the exercise group and 47% in the book group. The use of medication for pain management decreased most markedly among the yoga participants. In follow-up interviews, the yoga participants were the only ones who experienced continued improvement in their condition 26 weeks later. Participants in the other two groups actually experienced a worsening of symptoms a half-year later. Twice as many of the participants in the yoga classes said they would definitely recommend the yoga program to others.

The results were undeniably positive, concluding that this particular approach to yoga, known as *Viniyoga*, is a **safe and effective treatment for chronic lower back pain**. *Viniyoga* is a particularly gentle form of yoga with a strong focus on individual adaptation and breath development. *It is extremely accessible for all body types*. This study provides physicians and other western-trained medical professionals conclusive evidence for recommending *Viniyoga* and possibly other therapeutically oriented styles of yoga to their patients.

Robin Rothenberg co-authored the yoga program and worked extensively with the researchers. She taught all the classes in the original study and is now training staff for a second, larger scale NIH study, currently underway, that uses this same *Viniyoga* protocol. Now she has recreated that program, so that you have the opportunity to experience the benefits of *Viniyoga* through **The Essential Low Back Program** in your own home!

The CDs and accompanying booklet are *not intended to replace a medical evaluation* of your particular back condition. If you are experiencing lower back pain, please consult with a doctor before beginning this or any other yoga or exercise practice. There are some conditions, such as serious disc herniation, recent back surgery, severe sciatica, or cancer, for which this program may not be beneficial. The information in this booklet is intended to facilitate your healing through yoga. If you would like to learn more about yoga therapy or about how to connect with a yoga therapist in your area, you can visit the International Association of Yoga Therapy's website at: www.iayt.org.

¹*Sherman KJ, Cherkin DC, Erro J, Miglioretti DL, Deyo RA. Comparing yoga, exercise, and a self-care book for chronic low back pain: a randomized, controlled trial. Ann Intern Med. 2005;143:849-56.*

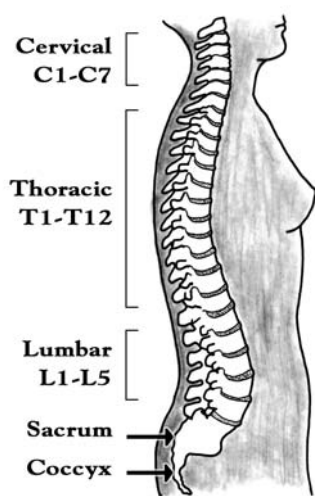
LOW BACK ANATOMY 101

The body is an amazing complex of bones, muscles, nerves, and organs that seem to communicate magically with one another to create the experience that we call healthy function. Without direction, the heart knows to beat, the lungs to breathe, and the liver to filter out toxins. For the most part, we ignore the body as long as it's doing what it "should," treating it as if it were the hired help, a servant to the mind. It's only when the body complains, as it does when injured, stressed, or left unattended for long periods of time that we bring our focus to it. Even then, we're mostly annoyed that it hurts, preventing us from enjoying the activities we love or getting a good night's rest. The body is then perceived as an obstacle to the mind's fulfillment, rather than a partner in need of some extra T.L.C..

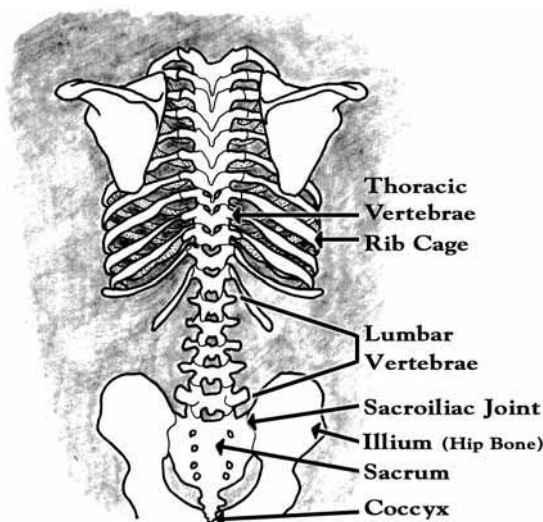
It rarely occurs to us that the body may, in fact, be expressing the unspoken frustrations and needs of the heart. Culturally, we are attuned to physicality and most of us notice "pain" at the physical level long before we're able to acknowledge underlying mental or emotional stressors. Many clients with back pain have discovered that when they changed jobs or created better boundaries with their children, and/or spouse, their back pain dissipated. Dr. John Sarno² has done extensive research on this mind-body connection, specifically in relationship to chronic lower back pain. His findings show that there's no direct correlation between structural anomalies seen on an X-ray and the level of pain in a particular patient. In other words, there are people with horrific looking degenerative disc disease who are pain-free, and folks who show insignificant structural changes but can't bend over to tie their shoes. As we move into the specifics about the physical anatomy, it's important to be aware that the other levels of our consciousness are always at play. To paraphrase many great wisdom teachings: **Healing happens when the body, mind, and heart are aligned.**

As you look at **diagram 1**, note that a healthy spine is shaped in a gentle S-curve. The concavity at the lumbar and cervical regions is mirrored by the convex structures of the thoracic curve and the sacrum. These natural curvatures create a shock absorption quality and support our Homo erectus (*upright*) stance. If any of these curves are flattened out, exaggerated, or twisted due to congenital tendencies, such as scoliosis, or as a result of injury or improper usage, the spinal structure as a whole will be impacted.

Forming the base of the spine are the coccyx (*tailbone*) and the sacrum (*triangular shaped structure that establishes the center of the pelvic bowl*), **diagram 2**. These are fused structures that allow for little movement. The five lumbar vertebrae sit above the sacrum and together form the lumbo-sacral curve, or what we commonly refer to as the "lower back". The health and balance of this curve is largely determined by the tone of the surrounding musculature. Continuing up the spine are the thoracic vertebrae, which connect to the rib cage; and the cervical vertebrae, which connect to the base of the skull.



³diagram 1 - Spine, Side View



³diagram 2 - Spine, Back View

²John Sarno, MD, *Healing Back Pain*, Warner Books, N.Y. 1991

³Diagrams adapted from AVI handouts with the permission of Gary Kraftsow.

INTRODUCTION TO YOGA IN RELATION TO CHRONIC PAIN

Yoga is an ancient science of mind and body that developed out of the Indus valley in India some 5,000 years ago. The original intent of the practices and teachings of yoga was to help us actualize our potential and free us from suffering. The teachings offer a wide array of techniques, with the recognition that suffering can occur on the physical, psychological, and spiritual realms and is often a mix of all of the above.

Unfortunately, in the west, contemporary yoga has extrapolated these complex and meditative practices of yoga to fit our physical culture. Focusing principally on mastery of the body, as can be observed in photos of yogis performing contortionist postures, mainstream yoga has become more of a sport than a serious discipline designed for personal transformation, as it was originally intended.

In reality, the ancient yogis were far more interested in where we place our attention than whether we can place our leg behind our head. By observing the nature of their own minds, they concluded that the human experience (*whether painful or not painful*) was entirely based on perception. Our perception is largely colored by our mood, and our mood is created primarily by the choices we make throughout our day. Following this logic, how we feel five minutes from now or tomorrow will have much to do with the choice we are making in this very moment. For instance, if we sit at a computer terminal all day, commute for 45 minutes each way, eat fast food, and take little time for exercise, self-reflection, relationships, and fun, we can hardly expect to feel good.

Our body, mind, and spirit will respond to the "fuel" we put into our proverbial tank. According to yoga, we're not just what we eat, but the sum total of what we eat, speak, think, and do. In essence, everything matters. However, most of us don't bother to pay attention to this equation until something goes wrong.

Pain is usually the indicator we use for "something going wrong." Rather than seeing pain as a negative, think of it metaphorically as the body's way of getting our attention, like the smoke detector in your home. It's there to alert you of a problem and to call you to take action. If you deactivate the detector because you find the noise annoying, by the time you realize there's a problem you could be engulfed in a three-alarm fire. In the same way, if we anesthetize our pain, tune it out, or push past it, we're ignoring our innate and ingenious alarm system from doing what it's intended to do: **Alert us to take action!**

When we're caught in the cycle of chronic pain, flitting from doctor appointment to therapist office, it's hard to imagine that there's anything more we could be doing to help ourselves. *Relax*. In fact, slowing down and learning to relax are some of the best coping skills for stopping the insidious repetition of dysfunctional and painful patterns in our lives. Breathing practices, combined with simple movements done slowly, help our nervous system to unwind and teach us how to literally let go of tension.

Increased respiratory capacity inspires the relaxation response, strengthens the immune and digestive systems, alleviates anxiety, and promotes a good night's sleep.

How we breathe can literally dictate how we feel. For instance, shallow chest breathing triggers the "fight-or-flight" phenomenon. If the diaphragm doesn't move freely as we breathe, it creates an environment that breeds chronic tension by blocking the lung's ability to expand fully. This sets up an internal message loop that our system is under duress. When the body and mind are receiving stress messages, everything contracts. Chronic subliminal contractions (*the kind we do unconsciously*) often lead to pain. If you carry tension in your neck, this could lead to headaches. If you carry stress in your back, this could create back pain.

The good news is that by developing healthier breathing habits we can reduce or even eliminate this pattern of chronically held tension. The breath provides a perfect conduit for the re-patterning process mentioned earlier. Since we're all habituated to breathe in a particular way (*multiplied by X number of breaths per minute, multiplied by the hours, days, and years of our lives*), our breath is a virtual playground for us to practice creating healing opportunities. You'll find that each of the practices in **The Essential Low Back Program** begins and ends with deep yoga breathing and that all the movements are coordinated with the breath. The emphasis on the breath is intentional to teach you a powerful tool for calming your own nervous system and unwinding yourself out of pain.

THE ABC'S OF YOGA POSTURE

There are five directions in which the spine can move: **Spinal Extension, Forward Bending, Back Bending, Lateral Bending** and **Twisting**. Ideally, we experience a sense of freedom without discomfort in all of them.

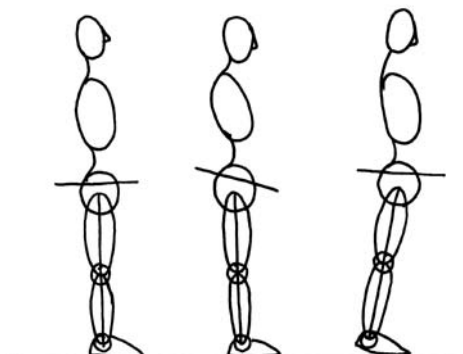
The first direction is **Spinal Extension**, which is an upward, intervertebral lift, moving us out of our habitual slump into what's commonly known as "good posture." In yoga terms, we call this **Mountain Pose**, **photos 3 and 4**, and it is considered the basis for all other yoga postures. **Mountain Pose** requires lots of support from those little intrinsic muscles as well as a keen awareness of how we hold our body upright in space. Developing the capacity to sustain a Mountain Pose awareness throughout our daily life takes practice and constant reinforcement. **diagram 22**.



photo 3 - Mtn. Pose Sitting



photo 4 - Mtn. Pose Standing



Proper Mtn. Pose Alignment Improper Alignment of Mtn. Pose

diagram - 22

The Essential Low Back Program



ARLEN

Two years ago, I was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease, stenosis, and scoliosis, all in the lumbar region. The result was severe sciatic pain in my right leg. I was advised to have surgery. At 55, I wasn't ready for a triple fusion, so I looked into some alternatives. After working with Viniyoga therapy for only a month, I now have more strength and flexibility than I've had in years. The yoga has 'awakened' some muscles I didn't know I had. My sciatic pain has been greatly reduced and I'm back on the golf course again.

PRACTICE SESSION 1

What you'll need for this practice:

A quiet space to practice, 45 minutes of uninterrupted time, a couple of firm blankets, and a chair or bolster.

Introductory Breathing

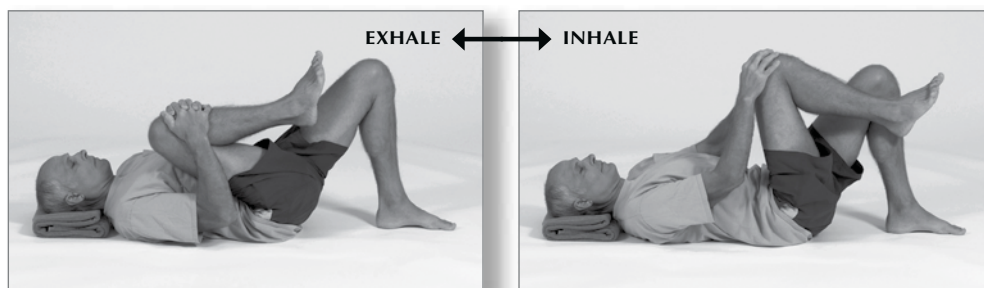
Spread out one of the blankets and make yourself comfortable lying on the floor. Use the second blanket to give support to your neck if needed. Place the bolster or chair under your knees so your low back is in a neutral, relaxed position. Bring your attention to your breath, focusing first on your exhalation, drawing your belly in towards your spine from the bottom up, engaging your muscles from your lower abdominals to your upper abdominals as if squeezing toothpaste from the bottom of the tube. As you engage your abdomen this way, feel your lower back pressing gently into the floor. As you inhale, expand your chest and then your belly, filling your lungs from the top down. Allow your body to relax completely as you progressively deepen your breath for 10-12 breath cycles.



Introductory Breathing

Knee to Chest Pose – One-Legged Variation

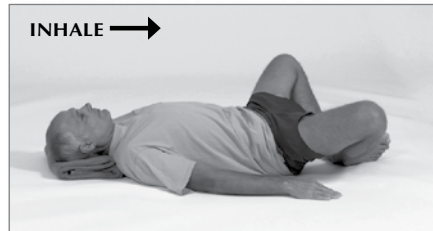
Remove the bolster and place both feet on the floor, knees bent. As you exhale, fold your right knee into your chest and place your hand on your knee. As you inhale, expand your belly, keep your hands on your knee, and relax your knee away from your chest until your arm is straight. Keep your neck, shoulders, jaw, and throat relaxed. As you exhale, engage your abdominals and fold your knee once again into your chest. Repeat 4 times, then rest your right foot to the floor. Pause and feel the effect of the posture. Repeat the entire cycle with your left leg.



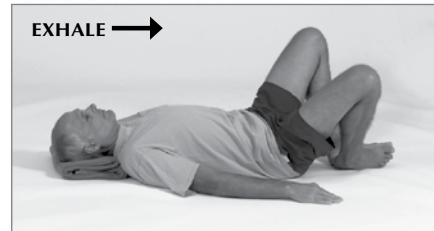
Knee to Chest Pose

Butterfly Pose – 2-Part Exhalation Variation

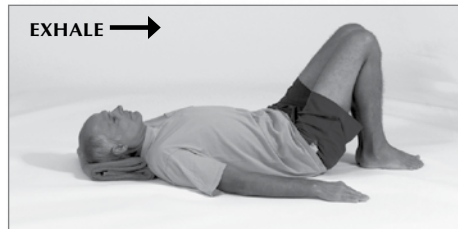
Turn the soles of your feet to meet one another, allowing your hips to open. Inhale and expand your breath from your chest to belly. As you exhale, slowly squeeze your thighs together, engaging your belly and the muscles of your upper legs, pressing your lower back into the floor. Inhale and open your legs. Exhale slowly and consciously, stabilizing your pelvic girdle. Repeat this movement 6 times. Next, divide the exhalation movement and breath into two equal parts, like this: First, close your thighs halfway and exhale half the breath. Pause. Then continue to breathe out and bring your thighs together. Repeat for another 6 breath cycles keeping the exhalation movement slow and conscious and keeping all your pelvic muscles engaged.



(a) Butterfly Pose



(b) • exhale, half way pause



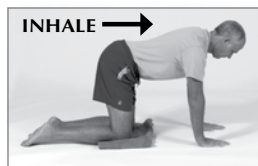
(c) • exhale all the way

*Wheel Pose – 2-Part Movement Variation

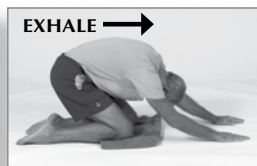
Come onto your hands and knees and place a blanket under your knees for padding. Position your hands shoulder-width apart, directly below your shoulders, and place your knees hip-distance apart, directly below your hips. As you inhale, lift your tailbone, head, and chest into a back bend or "smile" position. As you exhale, engage your belly and draw in, tucking your tailbone under, stretching your hips halfway towards your heels to create a domed or rounded back. Release your chest and forehead to the floor. Pause. Inhale and lift forward. Repeat this cycle 3 times. For the next 3 cycles, stretch your hips all the way back so they rest on your heels. Forehead and forearms rest down as you release all the way back into **Child's Pose**.

Stay and rest in **Child's Pose** with your hips resting on your heels, arms either resting by your ears or by your heels and your forehead relaxed on the floor or blanket.

If you have a knee condition that prohibits you from kneeling, please do the seated, chair variation. For a full description of Seated Wheel or Seated Child's Pose, see pg. 64.



Wheel Pose



• exhale, half way pause



Resting Wheel/Child's Pose



Seated Child's Pose
pg. 64

Relaxation

Lie down comfortably as you did in the beginning resting position. Place the bolster or chair under your knees, so your lower back can relax in a neutral position. Evenly spread your body across the floor. Let the whole body rest. Relax the breath, keeping the mind focused on the movement of the breath and the gentle release of muscular tension. Remain in this position for 3-5 minutes.



Relaxation and Lying Pranayama

Lying Pranayama/Deep Yoga Breathing

Begin to bring consciousness to the flow of the breath, making your breath more dynamic. As you breathe out, draw your belly in towards your spine from the bottom up, engaging the muscles from the lower abdominals to the upper abdominals, as if squeezing toothpaste from the bottom of the tube. As you engage your abdomen this way, feel your lower back pressing gently towards the floor. As you inhale, expand your chest and then your belly, filling your lungs from the top down. Deepen your breath progressively, staying focused on the extended exhale. Begin to divide your exhalation breath into 2 parts. Release half the breath as you draw your navel to your pubic bone. Pause. Then continue to engage your upper abdomen (*from navel to solar plexus*) as you press the second half of the breath out. Inhale freely, expanding from your chest to your belly. Repeat this 2-part exhalation for 8 breath cycles. Then, relax your breath and rest quietly for a few more minutes.

To come out, bring your knees into your chest, roll over onto your side, and press yourself up to a seated position. Sit quietly and observe the effect of your practice.

LIFE REFLECTIONS:

*In this moment, how is my breath?
When I slow down and feel my breath, what
do I learn about how I am living in my body?*

~

“BREATHE”
is the most life-affirming mantra I can recite.

