

New year's resolutions – developing a home practice

So you have a new mat, maybe for Christmas, and have been considering developing your own home practice. But where do you start? The leap from the class(es) you so enjoy to practising on your own can seem a challenging one. The good news is that you have overcome the hard part just by rolling out your mat.

In this article, I'd like to suggest a few simple limbers and basic poses to get you started. A shorter practice each day, as I am sure you have heard, is preferable to a long class once a week and once you have started, you may just find it feels so good that you would like to return regularly.

So where do you actually begin? A good starting point, as in most classes, is lying on your back (with the feet on the floor if the back feels uncomfortable) in *savasana* or corpse pose. Lie with your legs a little wider than the hips and your arms by your sides, a little away from the body, palms facing up to let the shoulders relax and simply feel the body sinking down into the mat. Start to bring the attention to the breath and notice how it feels at this point in time. Lengthen the exhalation by one or two counts and let go a little more each time you exhale. This is your chance to let go of the stresses of the day or of any tension or fatigue. Some well-known yoga practitioners would advocate that this is in fact the most important pose of all.

Limbers

Yoga classes usually incorporate a number of limbers to warm up the major joints such as the hips and shoulders to prepare you for the postures to come. From *savasana*, start to move the body, and come into a big stretch with the hands interlaced overhead. Place one hand on either knee and draw slow circles moving the knees away from one another. Inhale the knees around and up and exhale them around and down and then change the direction of the circles. Bring yourself to sitting (you can rock backwards and forwards to wake up the spine if that is available to you or come straight to sitting) and find a comfortable seated position, sitting firmly on your sitting bones. Then draw slow circles with your shoulders, inhaling them up and exhaling them down, through their full range of movement.

Cat-cow

One pose that you are very likely to have come across in class is the cat (or cat-cow). This is probably because it offers an effective way to warm up the spine and to start to synchronise movement with the breath. Sit with your hands under your shoulders, fingers nice and spread, and knees under your hips and hip width apart. As you inhale, lengthen along the spine, then tilt the sitting bones up and look gently up. As you exhale, round the spine, relax the head and shoulders and feel the shoulder blades moving away from each other. Sense where in your back you might possibly be less mobile (for many, this might be the upper back). For a variation, you can add the 'lion's breath' on the exhale, sticking your tongue out and exhaling fairly vigorously through the mouth; an invigorating breathing exercise which is said to give 'sweet speech'.

Downward dog

Once back in the table top position, tuck the toes under and come into the first downward dog (*adho mukha svanasana*) – lift the sitting bones up and back towards the ceiling and come into a shape like an inverted 'V'. Keep the knees bent at first and throughout if the hamstrings are tight. You can also 'walk the dog', lifting one heel and then the other to stretch out the alternate hamstrings. When the feet are still, feel the base of the fingers grounding into the mat and broaden the shoulders. The sitting bones are moving up and back while the heels are moving towards the floor (they may well not reach the floor), thus stretching out your spine. Relax the head and neck and breathe. Downward dog can feel most odd/uncomfortable at first, but rest assured that with practice it becomes a haven to return to, particularly for example, in a *vinyasa*, or flowing class!

Let's now move into some standing postures, so from downward dog, walk the hands towards the feet, keeping the head low and bending the knees.

Standing forward bend

From here, we can take a soft standing forward bend (*uttanasana*). Keep the knees slightly bent, feet hip width apart, hold the elbows and just hang, relaxing the head and neck. The back of the legs will be stretching as the spine releases down with gravity. Forward bends are calming in effect so nice to practise as a gentle counterpose. To come out, place the hands on the hips, bend the knees, and inhale with a flat back to standing.

Tree pose

Practising balances regularly helps to clear the mind as you literally cannot focus on thoughts coming through at the same time as the balance! From Warrior II, step the feet together and ground down into the left foot. Place the right heel on the left foot with the knee turned out to the right. Stay here or inhale and lift the right foot and place it against the left leg (anywhere aside from on the knee). You can keep the arms on the hips or if balanced, inhale and lift them overhead, hands together or apart to ease the shoulders. Keep the standing leg nice and firm like a tree trunk and relax the upper half. Imagine you are a tree – with a grounded trunk/lower half and with relaxed branches/upper half. Practice on both sides.

Warrior II

Warrior II or *virabhadrasana II* evokes the focus and grounded nature of the warrior. Step your feet three and a half feet apart and turn the back foot in about 30 degrees with the front foot facing forward. The heels are in line with each other or with the instep. Inhale and raise the arms to parallel and as you exhale, slowly bend the front knee, making sure the knee is in line with the toes and not shooting past the ankle. Turn the gaze to look over the front hand and try to keep the back arm the same height as the front and the torso upright. To come out, inhale and straighten the front leg and take the other side. As we enter the new year, you can use the pose to help you focus on any new year's resolutions (or *sankalpa* in Sanskrit) you may have made, evoking the determination of the warrior to embed your own resolution.

Seated forward bend

Like the standing forward bend, seated forward bends are also calming in their effect. From standing, make your way to a comfortable seated position. If you find your back is rounding, sit on some height such as on the edge of a block. Seated forward bends can exacerbate lower back conditions, so we'll practise this one with the knees quite bent. So sitting firmly on the sitting bones, inhale and lift up through the torso and exhale to come forward and hold the legs. Relax the head and shoulders completely and feel the sense of your chest on or moving towards your thighs. Feel the breath all along the back side of your body. Inhale to come back to a seated position.

Seated twist

Following Christmas, you may well be focused on a detox or healthier living! Twists are believed by some to have a squeeze and soak detox effect. Let's take a simple seated twist. (Even simple poses when practised mindfully can be powerful). Find your sit bones again and feel the natural lift that arises when you sit firmly on your sitting bones. Place the right hand on the left knee with the left hand behind the left buttock. Inhale, sit tall and as you exhale, start to twist from your belly upwards so that the head turns last. Keep the head in line with the torso. You can close your eyes to feel the internal effects of the twist. Inhale to come gently back to centre and take the twist on the other side.

To close

To close your practice, come to lying again on your mat. Hug your knees in to your chest to release the lower back. Then set yourself up again for *savasana*, with the knees bent if you have any tightness in the lower back and with a block under the head if your chin is pointing up. Notice how you feel at the end of the practice and let your body and mind completely relax. You can imagine drawing your breath up from your toes through your body to the crown of your head and then exhaling the breath from the crown of your head to your toes, as though it were washing through your body.

So well done – not only have you committed to a home practice but now you will hopefully have a few simple tools to get started. Please do keep me posted on how you get on if you would like to!

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**If you have an existing medical condition, please consult a healthcare practitioner before practising.*