

Psoma Yoga
Donna Martin

Namaste!

I have been practising and teaching yoga since 1970. I studied with teachers of various traditions and lineages, including several trained by Iyengar and Desikachar, as well as yoga therapy with A.G.Mohan. My approach has also been influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, Kum Nye, and by teachers of the Feldenkrais Method. I have also worked as a stress management specialist, addictions counselor, and bodymind therapist. Since 1990 I have worked closely with Ron Kurtz, creator of the Hakomi Method, and have been an international trainer of that method since 1996. I am coming back to teaching yoga with a strong Hakomi and Buddhist influence and call this approach Psoma Yoga.

This is a body/mind/spirit practice which can be used for yourself to enhance your yoga and/or meditation practice. It can be also be offered as a way to teach yoga classes, or to support others in their healing journey. It, in the ancient yoga tradition, is grounded in the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a state of mind that involves the ability to be fully present, aware of whatever is happening, receptive to any subtle nuances and changes that occur. It requires a sense of wonder, an openness to what is, an absence of an agenda or judgment or any attachment to outcome.

The practice is to continually notice *how* we do things, not just what we do.

Practicing mindfulness in standing, for example, we can notice the habitual and automatic patterns that organize the way we stand, without moving to "correct" them. How are we standing? And how does our way of standing in our body express the way we stand in relation to others and to Life?

In this practice we want to become curious about whatever we notice: a tightness in the chest or belly, perhaps, or an uneven distribution of weight. We then begin to study it a little, perhaps even very slightly exaggerating it to help us become even more aware of the experience that goes with it. Another way to practice is to explore any postures or movements that *invite* the habitual patterns to change and to think of these simply as *experiments*.

What happens as we do this pose or movement? How does it feel? Where does the body feel resistance? How does it change the way the body relates to the ground? To the space around the body? To another person? How do we feel different in the body after doing this pose or movement?

When we are ready to change, and when we offer our body a new alternative that feels more natural and nourishing, the change can happen easily.

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"Be at least as interested in what goes on inside you as what happens outside. If you get the inside right, the outside will fall into place."¹

The intention of yoga and meditation practices is to cultivate a greater capacity for quiet self-reflection, the kind of self-witnessing, self-acceptance, and self-understanding, that allows for a more liberating and creative participation in Life. One of the most useful things we can learn from our practice is the capacity to calm ourselves down when distressed. Only by calming down and finding a quiet place inside, where we can just *be* with an experience, only then can we find the freedom to respond, rather than react. The inner peace we will find is healing both for ourselves and for others.

Psoma Yoga as a Personal Practice

In this approach to yoga as a personal practice, we follow these steps:

1. We establish a safe and loving context for learning and healing to occur by establishing a calm, compassionate, appreciative reflective presence and connection with ourselves. We practise being with ourselves with kindness and respect.
2. We use mindfulness and reflective presence to become more aware of how we are organizing our bodily experience, especially in any ways that are unnecessarily limiting or hurtful.
3. We pay attention to present bodily experience to discover how our body is expressing attitudes and beliefs, and how each bodily expression is organized by unconscious habits.
4. We maintain an experimental attitude and use mindfulness to allow for the possibility of change that comes through enhanced awareness... what are we doing habitually and automatically, and what would be a nourishing alternative to our old patterns?
5. We complete with the experience of something physically (and spiritually) nourishing, staying with the experience long enough for it to integrate and penetrate our cells and our bodymind.

¹ Eckhart Tolle

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In Psoma Yoga the practice is to continually notice *how* we do things, not just what we do. Practicing mindfulness in standing, for example, we can notice the habitual and automatic patterns that organize the way we stand, without hurrying to “correct” them.

We want to become fascinated with whatever we notice: a tightness in the chest or belly, perhaps, or an uneven distribution of weight. We then want to study it a little, perhaps even very slightly exaggerating it to help us become even more aware.

Our habits tend to resist what feels like a correction and the result might be a kind of layering of tension patterns. For example, if the habit is to round the shoulders, there is a systematic tightening of certain muscles. Simply to bring the shoulders back, without addressing the habitual holding patterns, merely adds another layer of tension. When the correcting action stops, there is an inevitable return to the habitual pattern unless there is some kind of change in consciousness.

The attitude we bring to our practice in Psoma Yoga is one of curiosity and appreciation. All our habits, even those involving unnecessary tension, were created as attempts to serve us, to help us function. With an experimental approach, we can discover and explore our habitual ways of doing things in order to bring them more fully into consciousness. Consciousness is choice. We can also experiment with alternative ways, paying attention to the felt sense of the experience we have as we do something different than our habits. The quality of attention we bring to this practice actually changes our habits and experiences by changing the brain and the signals it sends to the body.

Let the asanas be doorways to your personal experience, which, in turn, invites you to a deeper sense of self. The practice is one of coming home.

SITTING: HIPS

Sit on the ground with the sole of your left foot placed against the inside of your right thigh, your right foot back by your right hip. Arrange yourself this way as comfortably as possible. Feel how your sitting bones rest differently on the ground. Is there any space between your right sitting bone and the ground?

Close your eyes and just feel the flow of breath into and out of the body. Notice if there is, anywhere in your body, an impulse for movement... Feel any places in your body where there is tightness, holding, or resistance...

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Intentionally take over doing whatever you notice happening and gently do it on purpose. Rest for a moment and just study whatever comes to your attention. Then, bring your attention again to your right sitting bone. Feel how the weight of your body is supported by the ground. As you inhale, gently lift the right sitting bone slightly higher, letting it settle again as you exhale. Do this mindfully a few more times. Then rest. What do you notice... what do you feel?

Again, inhaling, let the right sitting bone lift slightly... pause: notice any impulses, any hints of a movement that wants to happen. Allow yourself to move gently with these impulses. (example: Do you feel an impulse to rotate and move into a twist?) Then come back to the starting position.

Rest. Feel any change in the relationship of your sitting bones to the ground. Study for a moment how you feel generally in the posture now. Repeat the position and movements on the other side. How do the sides feel different?

SAVASANA (corpse pose)

Lying on your back, knees bent, feet standing, arms by your sides. Just sense the shape of your back on the ground and feel your body being supported. Very gradually let one leg, then the other, extend long on the ground. Study how this changes the shape of the back on the ground. Feel the weight of the legs and arms supported by the ground. Notice if one leg seems less supported than the other. Create some tightness in this leg, as if you were about to lift it right off the ground. Then release. Tighten again... then release... Repeat this with the other leg.

Sense any changes in how the legs feel supported by the ground. Feel the arms. If one arm seems less in contact with the ground, tighten it as you did with the leg. Then release. Do it again... release. Repeat with the other arm. (If both arms or legs feel about the same, tighten them simultaneously and release several times.) Feel the weight of the head on the ground. Imagine just starting to lift the head without actually lifting it. Then relax. Repeat. Now feel the flow of breath. Imagine or sense the breath coming in and up from the ground, rising into the front body as you inhale, and sinking back down into the ground from the back body as you exhale. You may feel a slight sensation of rising... almost like levitating... as you inhale, followed by a settling feeling as you exhale. Experience this sense of rising slightly away from the ground and sinking back into the ground with your full body weight as you feel the breath moving into and out of the body. Then rest. Surrender yourself to the support of the ground.