



Yoga for difficult times

Life isn't always smooth sailing but, when challenging winds disturb the waters below you, your yoga practice can help you better ride the waves and chart a calmer route.

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"Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly." - Proverb

Sometimes things are going along just so when, suddenly, you're in crisis. It could be financial trouble, natural disaster, divorce, loss of a loved one, serious illness or something equally painful. During life's most challenging moments, the guided wisdom and practices of yoga provide tremendous gifts of support, nourishment and healing, opening your heart to universal love. You may even discover that the greater the difficulty, the greater your spiritual opportunity to evolve.

JNANA YOGA: THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE

The ancient yogic text *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* is a treatise on how to end suffering. Patanjali teaches that all suffering occurs from misunderstanding the nature of reality. You mistake the impure, distressing, impermanent and transient as pure, as happiness, unchanging and the self.

In yoga, you practise observing the body-mind without judgement, where you notice all thoughts, feelings and sensations as mere ripples on the deeper, still waters of awareness. Ultimately, it frees you from identifying with "your story" — the ego, your body, your thoughts, feelings, sensations of suffering and happiness — replacing it with the clarity of pure awareness.

When you experience pain and hardship, yoga *asana* (posture) eases exhaustion, supports your emotional wellbeing and helps with your ability to cope. Yoga practice generates more *prana* (life force) for you, cleansing your *nadis* (energy channels). When

consciousness settles through practice, it can reflect pure awareness, and from there you can open to the possibility of acceptance. The inner journey is a softening; a sweetness of opening the heart to love.

SURRENDER YOUR EFFORTS

A crisis can accelerate your spiritual understanding in a way that might not have been previously accessible. Surrender to *Ishvara Pranidhana* (the divine) at such a time can become an awakening without comparison. You realise your efforts are divinely supported and, through surrender, awareness expands. Take solace in the stillness that resides within your heart; it is there for you and can be found.

Effort descends into effortlessness through intention and loving practice. If this is your spiritual turning point, the scriptures may come alive for you as you learn to let go of suffering. *Atha* means "now" and is how the *Yoga Sutras* begin. Now may be the time for *svadhyaya*: the study of the self through the sutras.

THE KLESHAS & MEDITATIVE ENQUIRY

Yoga advises to watch the aversion to suffering and let it play out without judging or identifying with it. As Patanjali instructs, examine the true nature of suffering, understanding the nature of the five *kleshas* (afflictions) within your life. The *kleshas* are:

- *Avidya*: ignorance, misapprehension about reality
- *Asmita*: egoism, identifying the self with the intellect
- *Raja*: attachment
- *Dvesa*: aversion
- *Abhinivesah*: clinging to life

From there, allow the stillness of meditation to subdue the *kleshas*. Enter meditative enquiry through intimate honesty, such as, "What happens if I allow the universe to *breathe* me?" and feel into it, or, "Can I know this without suffering?" or the simple profundity of, "Who am I?"

DO LESS, BE MORE ... SLOW DOWN

Chip Hartranft in his new translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* says *asana* is a window that opens onto some of our deepest personal conditioning and the suffering it generates. "In order to relax into things as they actually are, one must surrender every last drop of the internalised desire to feel good. That desire is shaped by our most cherished ideas about what constitutes good and bad, as well as by ingrained, organic perceptions of pleasure, pain and neutrality ... In *asana* one must do less to be more." Transcending conditioned notions, expectations and beliefs in this way liberates you for greater happiness.

Give yourself permission to let go of certain tasks and slow down. Do only what is necessary and prioritise relaxation and adequate sleep. Focus your energy on a creative outlet. Be kind to yourself during difficult times, slowing the exhalation and breathing into your belly several times a day.

Increase yoga practices that lead to an open heart. By attending yoga classes, workshops and retreats, you affirm your applied daily practices and feel connected with others. The positive approach of a compassionate teacher as guide is part of the healing process.

INNER STILLNESS & GRATITUDE

Through yoga you learn to remain open to what arises, see its transience and



Supta baddha konasana

let it go. Allow for sorrow and grief and a whole array of emotions. Observe them and minimise shock by calming the nervous system response through restorative yoga. Practise gratitude for the simplest of things, such as a flower in bloom, the sunset on the horizon, your legs and feet for carrying you forward. Surrender all efforts back to the source of existence. Remind yourself of the positives available to you in your life.

Dr Lauren Tober, a clinical psychologist and yoga teacher, advises to "practise being with your body, thoughts, beliefs just as they are, then you develop trust in yourself to be OK with whatever arises". During crisis moments and life's difficulties, Tober asks clients to notice where they feel joy in their bodies, to tap into it, rather than focus on aches and pains and forgetting to focus on joy. Alternatively, she advises to think of a time when you felt joyful. "It's about developing inner resources for safety, security and joy," she says. Tober recently launched an online course, Daily Dose of Bliss, to help people navigate their lives (laurentober.com).

AYURVEDIC BALANCE

Difficult times can lead to *dosha* imbalance. If anxiety is heightened and you are having trouble focusing on a task, *vata* may be off-balance. To become grounded, practise restorative

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yoga, focusing on the subtle breath movements. Consume good-quality oils or ghee and eat regularly; routine is the key. Perform *abhyasa* (daily self-massage) with quality sesame oil. *Abhyasa* is a loving act of self-care that cannot be underestimated.

If you are heading towards anger or frustration, chances are *pitta* needs attending. Cool the fire with herbs like mint, coriander and fennel; avoid eating chilli or curries. Cool the brain with restorative poses that rest the frontal lobes by resting the forehead on a bolster. Perform *abhyasa* lovingly with cooling coconut oil.

If you are headed for a heavy, inert depression, like you want to stay in bed all day, *kapha* is likely out of balance. Twelve rounds of energetic *surya namaskar*, sun salutations, will help move *kaphic* depression. Avoid ice-creams and sweet, sour or salty foods. Play upbeat, uplifting music and practise heart-centred yoga that energises and restores. Perform *abhyasa* with olive or mustard oils.

PRANAYAMA

Connect with your breath and slow the exhalation. This creates an inner calming response. Practise the Full Yogic Breath, inhaling fully into the belly, the chest and the throat in that order, then exhaling fully from the belly, chest then throat with each and every breath.

RESTORATIVE YOGA

Restorative poses hold your being and provide nurturance on multiple levels. These gently physical holding poses offer opportunities to let go of traumatic wounds from within the body, giving freedom towards new life.

The poses are designed to reduce stress and restore balance to your nervous system. By restfully bending backwards over a bolster or forward bending to hug it, you can feel deeply supported and bring emotional healing to your body-mind. Layers of tension are released the longer you hold the restful pose, cleansing your system. The parasympathetic nervous system response to each pose has an immediate calming effect, offering receptivity into stilling consciousness through meditation. Binding with straps in restorative poses contains you, allowing for further release and letting go as you are physically supported without needing to hold yourself in place.

For this practice you will need a chair, a mat, blanket, bolster and strap.



Supta baddha konasana

Reclining bound angle pose (supta baddha konasana)

Place a three-fold blanket on a bolster as a firm pillow. Sitting with buttocks against back of bolster, bend knees, placing soles of feet together. Loop strap around hips near sacrum (not lower back), over top of thighs and under ankles. Pull strap to comfortably tight position. Gently recline over bolster on exhalation. Adjust position of blanket so it's under head and neck, not shoulders. Rest arms to sides, palms up. Rest deeply, naturally lengthening the breath, sigh tension away. Stay there for a few minutes. Slowly come to sitting, remove strap.



Adho mukha virasana



Viparita dandasana Part 1



Viparita dandasana Part 2

Downward-facing hero pose (adho mukha virasana)

Sitting on knees facing bolster, separate knees to width of mat, bring big toes to touch. Bring bolster between legs. Inhale. On exhalation, pivot from hips, folding over bolster. Wrap arms around bolster, hugging it gently. Turn head to the left. If you have a yoga sandbag, place this evenly over your sacrum. After a while, turn your head to the right. Slowly release from pose.

Intense forward stretch (supported uttanasana)

Standing feet hip-width apart, lift kneecaps. Inhale. Exhale bending forward, placing forehead on bolster, arms resting on top. Add extra blankets for increased bolster height as needed. Tilt forward so hips, knees and ankles are in line. Keeps ribs back, shoulders away from ears, soften backs of

knees. Breathe and relax. Hold pose for a few minutes, coming up slowly.

Inverted staff pose (viparita dandasana)

Place bolster in front of chair lengthways, yoga mat folded and hanging over chair. Climb through back of chair. Hold sides of chair, slide hips towards back of chair so buttocks rest on back edge of chair, and mid-thoracic presses on front edge of chair. Place crown of head lightly on bolster. Straighten legs. Hold pose for a few minutes. Coming out of pose, sit upright for a moment, then climb out. This soothing pose symbolises the yogi's salutation to the Divine.

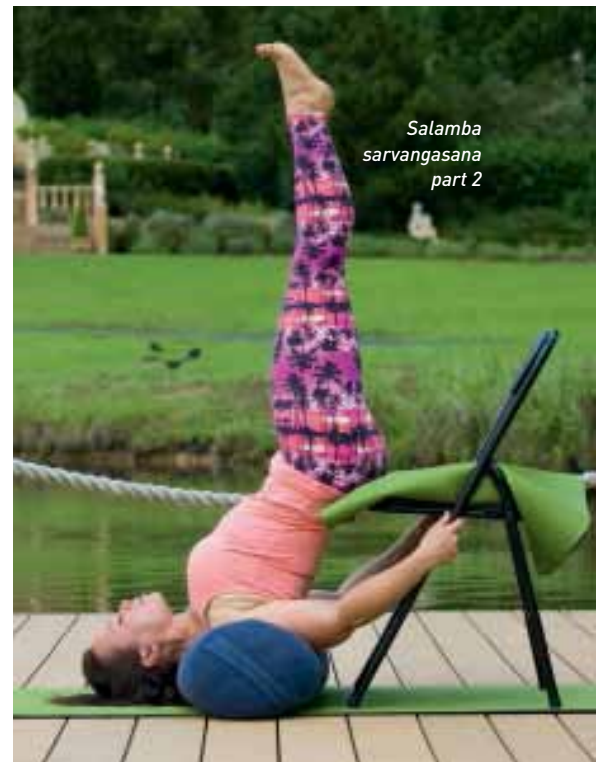
Caution: Only perform this pose if you have experience getting into it; otherwise, practise *setu bhandha sarvangasana* (supported bridge pose with a block under sacrum or lying over two bolsters lengthways, head and shoulders resting on floor). Do not perform this pose if you have high blood pressure, are pregnant or have eye problems such as glaucoma or detached retina.



Supported Uttanasana



Salamba sarvangasana part 1



Salamba sarvangasana part 2

Supported shoulder stand (salamba sarvangasana)

Place bolster in front of chair sideways, yoga mat folded and hanging over chair. Climb onto chair, buttocks towards back of seat, face back of chair. Holding on, raise legs over back of chair, slide your back and buttocks over the edge of seat. Shoulders resting on bolster, head on floor. Buttocks, lower back and waist rest on front edge of chair. Lift and straighten legs. Hold pose for several minutes. To release, place feet on chair, gently push chair away and lie buttocks and back over bolster for a few minutes more.

Caution: If you are not familiar with this pose, leave it out until you can be assisted by your yoga teacher. The same contraindications as for *viparita dandasana* apply to this pose.

Supported head-to-knee pose (janu sirsasana)

Sitting on mat, bend left leg and bring heel to groin. Foot touches right thigh. Place bolster with folded blanket across right calf. Inhale, lift spine and arms up,



Janu sirsasana



Viparita karani

exhale pivoting forward from hips, rest forehead on blanket. If you need extra height, rest bolster and blanket on chair. Draw shoulders down, close eyes. Stay for one minute before changing sides.

This pose activates the heart chakra, helping treat depression and insomnia.

Inverted lake pose (viparita karani)

Place bolster or folded blankets close to wall, with small gap. Sit sideways on edge of bolster, left hip touching wall. Bring legs up the wall as you bring head and shoulders to rest on floor. Adjust so buttocks touch wall. Strap thighs together just above knees to allow for deep restoration. This pose alleviates exhaustion, boosts confidence and reduces depression.

Afterwards, lie in *savasana*, the full relaxation pose for full yogic breath, followed by the meditation below.

A meditation for difficult times

This meditation is adapted from one given by Baba Lokenath Brahmachari (1730-1890).

Sitting comfortably, bring your attention to your breath. Offer all that you are, and everything that arises, to the light within the breath. See the light of the inhaling and exhaling breath. See yourself as a spark of this brilliant, diamond-white light, surrounded in it, and as the essence of it. Allow this divine light to flow through you, informing and forming your life. Offer all difficulties into the light. Let the light burn them away until they disappear into it. 🌟

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