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by Laurice D. Nemetz, MA, BC-DMT, LCAT, E-RYT

A Place of Balance: Yoga Practice for the Kayaker

The American science fiction writer Frank Herbert wrote, "There's no secret to balance. You just have to feel the waves." I have found great joy in sea kayaking and love the experience of being connected so completely with the watery world around me. As I deepen my own kayaking skills, I often closely watch

For a kayaker, a balanced body is key to feeling great on and off the water. The practice of yoga helps to get the body—and the mind—into equilibrium.

Photos courtesy of Laurice Nemetz

The author in Warrior II pose on the beach, Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica

senior kayakers and their efficient strokes on the water. Out of water though, some of the same skilled bodies experience muscle aches, back pain and hips permanently rotated outward, in a frog-legged kayak stance. Novices and experienced kayakers alike can benefit greatly from a balanced yoga practice that helps the body and mind function as efficiently as possible on land and water. Immediate benefits include a lack of soreness, a heightened sense of awareness and a shift to feeling fully present on the water.

Bodies are a lot like kayaks interacting with the water in that they work to maintain a sense of equilibrium. When we are out of alignment, our body responds with pain and chronic patterns that often predispose us to injury. When alignment is good and balance is neutral, the muscular and connective tissue net of the body does not have to work so hard and can function pain free.

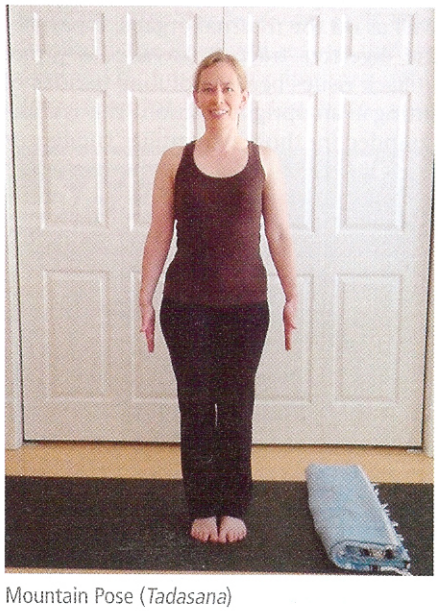
Many kayakers are hampered by stiffness and a few have the opposite problem: hyper-mobility. Neither is ideal. A toned and balanced body uses muscles when necessary and can relax them completely when they are not needed for a task.

If we are feeling discomfort in a cranky hip or sore shoulder, it is hard to paddle efficiently, much less sit in our kayaks for any length of time. The physical poses in yoga are ideal for helping with this. Known as *asanas* (*asana* loosely translates into "comfortable seat"), the poses quite literally prepare the body for sustaining long periods of sitting during meditation. But in yoga, the *asana* is not just about sitting. It is only one part of a ladder of steps designed to reach loftier goals. The word yoga itself comes from the Sanskrit "*yuj*," which means to yoke or join together. It is the concept of being intertwined with everything around us. If the body fidgets or the mind is thinking about a sore hip, it is quite impossible to reach any higher level of existence! The same holds true for kayaking. If we are uncomfortable sitting for long periods of time, not only is it hard to paddle efficiently, we also lose connection with the world around us.

A thoughtful yoga program that addresses the biomechanics of kayaking will help the paddler stay comfortable for years to come. On a mental and spiritual level, yoga can help regulate those waves and challenges that come into our lives both on and off the water. Breathing and body patterns we hold are closely connected to emotional experiences. In kayaking, a particular situation might trigger a body memory response (such as a tense jaw in response to a large wave) that can repeat body stress unless the response to that pattern is broken. In yoga, we are not looking to be devoid of emotion, only less reactive to those triggers around us. Of course, the body's response to a big wave ("hey, that might be trouble!") certainly is worth listening to, but often our bodies shout louder responses than the situation may warrant. The ups and downs of life in general become easier to ride when we are connected to the present experience and able to let go of past responses.

On kayak trips, rise early in the morning to explore what areas of your body need to come into balance. As you develop your practice, you will find this a particularly rewarding experience. If you're feeling tense, you might work through a back-bending practice to open your chest and challenge your body. If you need a calm, quiet practice, you might come into forward folding and restorative poses that you hold for a long time. Look toward balancing the actions of a normal body and work through flexion, extension and rotation.

The following introduces a few key yoga poses for kayakers to improve balance. In any yoga practice, work on non-judgment as well. For example, don't be attached to reaching your feet in a forward fold, but work toward optimal alignment in your body at the moment you're doing the asana. If you can be as fascinated by your yoga practice as you are with your paddling, you will never be bored.



Mountain Pose (*Tadasana*)

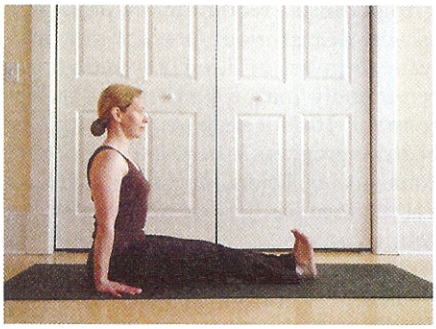
Yoga doesn't require many props, but as you deepen your practice you may want to invest in a few key pieces: an eco-friendly mat, a block and a water-resistant, 10-foot strap. As with any new exercise program, it is wise to check with your doctor before beginning. Also, a trained yoga teacher can help you perfect your technique.

Mountain Pose (*Tadasana*) and Staff Pose (*Dandasana*)

Tadasana (mountain pose) and *Dandasana* (staff pose) are the standing and seated reference points for all other poses in yoga practice. As simple as they sound, standing well and being seated comfortably are not as easy as you might assume. Most people can stand, but few can stand evenly for any length of time without having to shift their weight. Likewise, sitting, especially in a kayak, can cause pain in the lower back if the body is strained in one area. In yoga there is the concept of *samskaras*, or the physical and mental "hiccupping" patterns we repeat over and over. Our physical *samskaras* may lead us to slump in the same position, predisposing us to injuring one shoulder, for example.

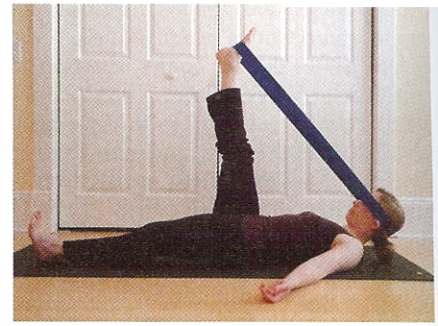
Tadasana is a great place to check some patterns in the body. Many people lean forward instead of balancing their weight evenly over their feet. To counter tight calf muscles and to bring weight onto the heels, try placing your toes on a yoga block, rolled mat or blanket, forcing your heels to the floor. Stand in this position, letting your tailbone drop toward the ground. When you step off the block or mat, notice the sensation of being shifted more toward the back of the body.

In *dandasana*, it is common for the pelvis (and sometimes the torso) to tilt backward, especially if the hamstrings are tight. To compensate for this, sit on the edge of your blanket or mat with your legs straight ahead and toes pointing up to the sky. The hamstrings (made up of the semitendinosus, the semimembranosus and the biceps femoris muscles) cross both the hip and the knee, which is why many people need to bend their knees in a forward fold position until they can overcome the tightness of the hamstrings and lengthen them. Many beginning kayakers, especially those who have been out of shape, lean back in their kayaks and paddle with their arms high in the air, wasting energy for an efficient stroke. Giving the paddler a



Staff Pose (*Dandasana*)

Down Dog (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*)



Hammock Pose

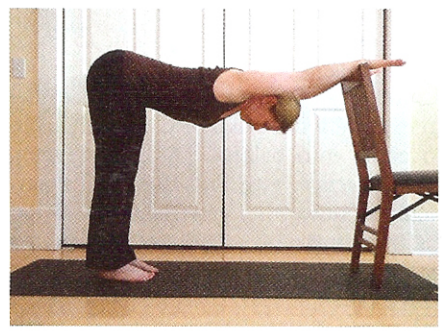
cushion to sit more upright will help, just as a folded blanket under the "sits bones" (the ischial tuberosities) helps the yogi sit more upright on the floor.

Practicing balance using the ideas of tadasana and dandasna can also be explored in your kayak. If you are in shallow, warm water, begin by straddling the kayak while still sitting in the cockpit. From this point, see if you can bring yourself onto the back deck of your boat, with legs still out to the sides. Notice where your body tends to shift, or even to what side you may fall. If you tend to fall toward your right, notice in *tadasana* whether you shift onto that hip as well. Developing this kind of awareness will keep your practice active.

Down Dog (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*) and Counter Dog

Down Dog is a pose of rest in an advanced yoga practice as well as a place to bring the spine into neutral alignment. In the beginning, however, tight shoulders and hamstrings can make this pose challenging. In general, kayakers have strong quadriceps, both from keeping their legs in the typical bent-leg resting position (especially new kayakers who may overuse foot braces) and from using these muscles while bending to lift and carry their kayaks.

Begin on hands and knees with the wrists under the shoulders and knees slightly behind the hips. Take the knees off the floor and send the hips and buttocks behind you. Reach the sits bones up and back and don't change the position of your hands, but keep the bend in your knees to begin and then slowly straighten through the legs, keeping length in the back of the body. Remember that you are looking to elongate the spine, and it may take two to three years of practice keeping your knees slightly bent before both your legs and back will lengthen to their full extent. The hamstrings must overcome what is known as "passive



Counter Dog

insufficiency," or the inability to lengthen sufficiently to produce full range of motion in all of the joints. The knees may need to remain bent until the hamstrings get used to being long and strong at the same time. Work the pose from a standing position with the wrists resting gently against a counter or rail if the floor is too much pressure. The torso should be parallel to the floor, with the hips directly over your ankles.

Knee to Chest (*Apanasana*)

This relatively easy looking pose has great therapeutic effects on the back as well as on the internal organs, especially the digestive tract. A kayaker is prone to back issues because of long periods of sitting in an upright position. This is compounded for those who utilize rudders or press horizontally against the foot brace for long periods.

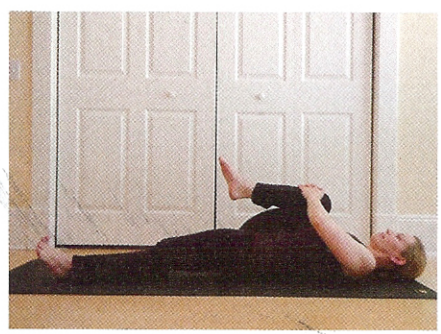
Lying on your back, bring one knee into the chest, lengthening the other leg along the floor and holding the position for at least half a minute. If the head tilts backward, support the neck with a rolled blanket. Repeat on the opposite side. For those paddlers with strong quadriceps and tight hip flexors (again a common result of staying for long periods in the bent-leg position), this pose can be particularly blissful when a weight, such as a sandbag, is placed on the extended leg.

Back Lying Hand-to-Toe (*Supta Padangusthasana*) into Hammock Pose

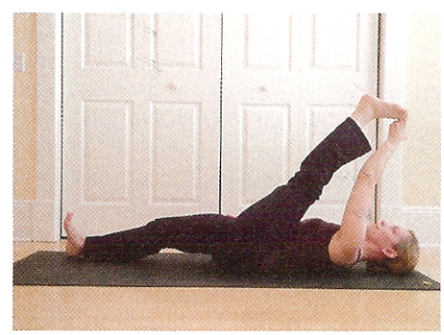
Hand-to-toe pose, or *supta padangusthasana*, is one of the easiest ways to work a gentle lengthening of the hamstrings. You can easily modify this reclining hand-to-toe pose by using a strap.

Lying on your back, put the strap (or reach with your hand to the big toe) around one extended leg while the other leg lengthens on the floor. If the head or shoulder lift off the floor, let out a bit more of the strap. Keep lengthening the extended leg. If this irritates your back, bend the knee of the leg on the floor. Switch sides.

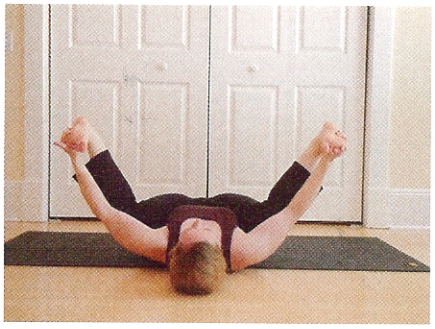
To transition to Hammock pose, tie the strap into a large loop and place one end in the middle of one foot and, holding the strap securely with both hands, carefully place the loop behind the



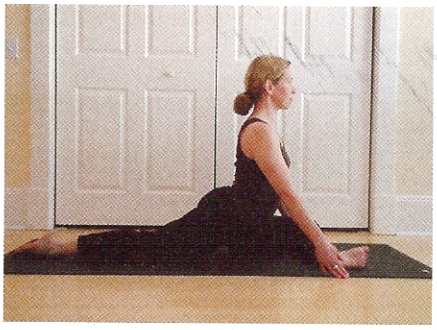
Knee to Chest (*Apanasana*)



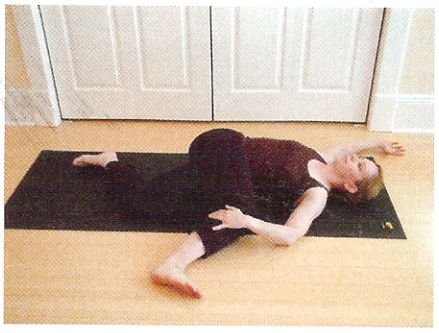
Back Lying Hand/Toe (*Supta Padangusthasana*)



Happy Baby Pose (*Ananda balasana*)



Pigeon Pose (*Eka Pada Rajakapotasana*)



Spinal Twist (*Supta Matsyendrasana*)

head, roughly behind the ears. The strap should be tight enough that the foot and head are gently in counterweight to one another, but open enough to feel balanced. The head, shoulders and extended leg will all be off the ground. Hammock pose is a non-traditional pose of my own naming—the sense of balance and relaxation should have you feeling as if you are resting peacefully in a hammock. Linger several minutes before switching sides.

Happy Baby Pose (*Ananda balasana*)

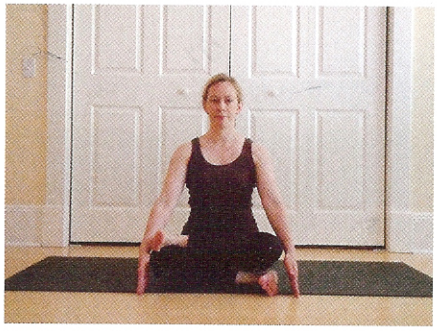
Happy Baby pose is a great hip opener. Happy Baby is one of the best ways to train the hips for easy entries and exits from the kayak. The ability to straddle the kayak and bring the legs smoothly into the cockpit is greatly helped by practicing this pose.

Lying on your back with feet in the air and soles pointed toward the ceiling, exhale and bring your knees down to the floor, reaching the outer edges of the feet with your hands. Think about bringing your shoulders and tailbone toward the floor. If you can't reach your feet, use a strap across the soles of both feet. Also, if your head tilts backward, use a small blanket to help support your neck. This pose opens the hips and can bring relief to the lower back.

Pigeon Pose (*Eka Pada Rajakapotasana*) and Fire-Log Stacking Pose (*Agnistambhasana*)

Pigeon pose prep is a great pose to help the novice kayaker get comfortable with the lateral rotation of the hips for kayaking. In this pose, the front leg rotates outward from the hip, while the back leg is in slight medial (inward) rotation to counter this action.

Begin on all fours and then bring your right knee toward your right wrist. Swing your right shin forward so it is parallel with the front of your mat. If you feel any pressure in the knees or if your hip



Fire-Log Stacking Pose (*Agnistambhasana*)

collapses toward the floor, place a blanket under it to square the hips evenly. Bring the body forward to rest. Change sides or transition first to *agnistambhasana* before changing to the second side.

Agnistambhasana, or fire-log stacking pose, helps to open the piriformis muscle that connects the top of the femur to the forward face of the sacrum, sometimes responsible for the squeeze of the neighboring sciatic nerve, a common problem for those seated in a kayak for long periods of time. Coming from Pigeon, swing your back leg forward so that both legs are stacked, one on top of the other, with the ankle over the knee on each side. Ultimately, the knee will rest on the opposite ankle, but if your hips are tight, allow a lot of space. Listen to your knees—they shouldn't hurt! Be patient in this pose and over time your hips will open more easily. Always look for alignment first and look to keep the ankle joint strong instead of collapsing it into your lap.

Spinal Twist (*Supta Matsyendrasana*)

A great stroke begins with an upper body that moves gently with the paddle instead of staying rigid in its orientation to the front of the boat. A lot of beginners will try to use power from the shoulder instead of loosening the hips and then using the center of the body to power the stroke. As body mechanics go, we tend to overutilize our "strengths" and underutilize muscles that actually assist in balancing our actions. The muscles needed for the paddling stroke are the large latissimus dorsi and rotational muscles of the back, as well as the obliques, which both act to rotate the core as well as stabilize it. This spinal twist is useful for both the beginner and advanced kayaker to balance the back musculature and to help release tension in the front of the chest.

Begin the Spinal Twist pose by lying on your back. With knees bent and feet on the floor, lift your hips slightly off the floor and shift both hips and buttocks to

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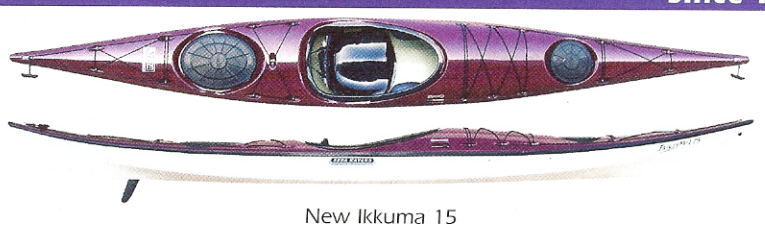

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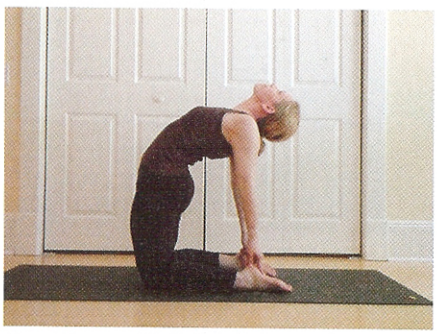


Camel Pose and Variations (*Ustrasana*)

the right and let your knees drop to the left. This shift in the hips allows the twist of the spine to be distributed more into the thoracic (middle) area if the spine and less into the lumbar, whose main function is stability along with flexion and extension. Open the chest (especially the pectoralis minor muscle) by bending the right arm at the elbow and letting the back of the arm and hand rest on the floor. If the shoulder is tight, use a prop under your wrist to support it. Return to the center with knees bent before transitioning to the other side.

Camel Pose and Variations (*Ustrasana*)

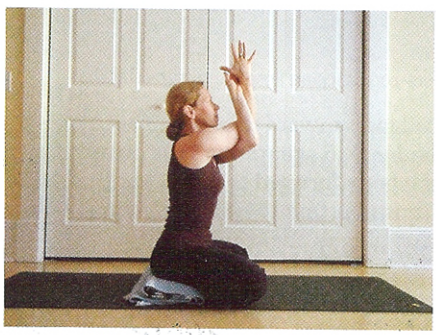
Camel pose is a great way to counter the tendency to roll shoulders inward and is a great extension pose that opens the front of the body. Use caution, or the alternative bridge pose, if your knees are uncomfortable on the floor.

Kneel on the floor with the legs about hip-width apart. Keep the legs perpendicular to the floor and lengthen upward before reaching behind you so that you are not putting pressure on the lower spine. If your hands can't reach your feet, you can place them on the back of the legs or onto blocks. Camel pose is a powerful backbend to help open the chest and work the spinal column. If this pose aggravates your knees, you can easily turn it into bridge pose (*Setu Bandha Sarvangasana*). Lie with your back on the floor and bend your knees so the soles of your feet rest on the floor. Lift the hips and buttocks off the floor and work the shoulders toward each other, with the hands reaching to interlace with each other under the body.

Cow Face (*Gomukhasana*) and Eagle Arms (*Garudasana*) Criss-Cross Strap

The shoulder girdle consist of the "SITS" muscles: supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor and subscapularis. These are the shoulder muscles that are affected in a rotator cuff injury. (See "Rotator Cuff Injury: Prevention and Recovery," by John Amtmann, *SK*, Aug. '08). This cuff is a highly unstable area of anatomy that supports the arm and allows for a large range of motion. The only other area with this much rotational movement in the body is the eye socket. The arm variations in Cow Face and Eagle Arms work the shoulder girdle in balance.

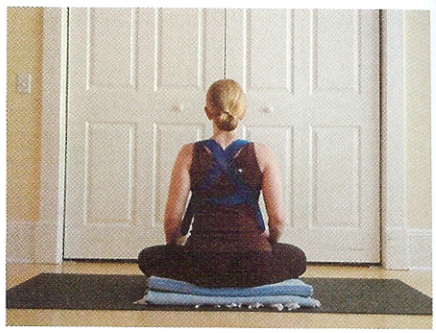
Cow Face (*Gomukhasana*)



Eagle Arms (*Garudasana*)

For Cow Face, using a strap if needed, pat yourself on the back with one arm, and take the other arm in the opposite rotation to reach toward that hand or strap. For Eagle Arms, cross the arms one over the other in front of the body and move hands toward each other to intertwine, lifting the arms slightly. Change sides.

Criss-Cross Strap (this is a non-traditional pose to help put the shoulder girdle and collarbones in better alignment). It is a bit more complicated, but helps to release tight upper trapezius muscles at the back of the neck and the levator scapulae muscles that pull the shoulder blades up toward your ears.



Criss-Cross Strap

These muscles tend to get tight with paddling and shrug the shoulders toward the neck. Place the strap horizontally across your back, just under the shoulder blades. Bring the free ends straight forward (under your armpits) and drape them over the top of your shoulders (don't cross yet!). Cross the strap ends behind you and bring them forward at your waist. Grip the ends and gently pull down and forward. The straps will ease your shoulders into a more relaxed position onto the rib cage while widening the collarbones.

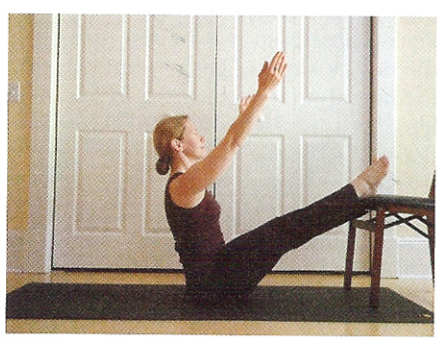
Boat Pose (*Navasana*)

From a seated position bring the legs and arms into a "V" shape. You should feel this pose working the deep abdominal muscles that are needed for balance in the kayak. If your core muscles are weak, you may feel a "gripping" sensation in the front of your legs, resulting from the quadriceps trying to take over the pose. If this occurs, place your feet lightly against a wall or a chair.

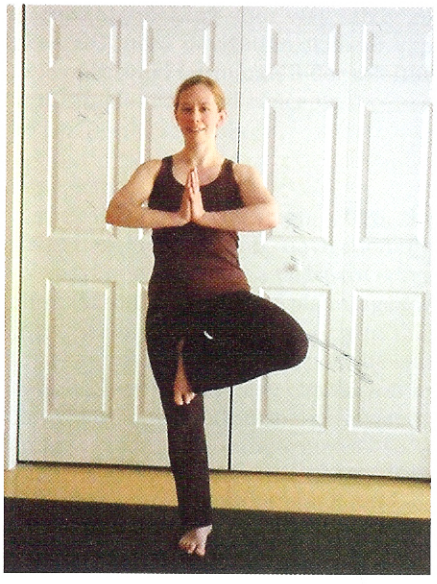
Tree Pose (*Vrksasana*)

Standing balance poses allow the body to work against gravity. Balance is never static but always moving in response to the environment.

From a standing position rotate one leg out to the side, and with bent knee place the foot on the opposite leg, high or low, just not pushing sideways on



Boat Pose (*Navasana*)

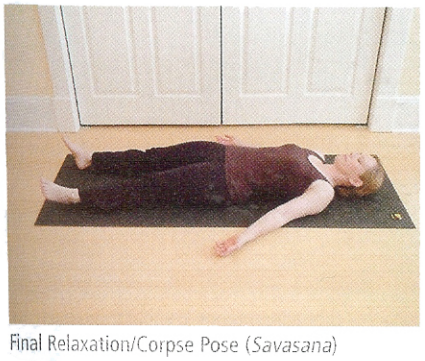


Tree Pose (*Vrksasana*)

the knee of the standing leg. Keep the body facing forward. Think of real trees and how they respond in a windstorm. The trees with lots of life (*prana* in yoga terms) easily bend and return to their original positions. Trees with dead limbs and branches are rigid and will break in a storm. Likewise, if you approach tree pose with rigidity, you will inevitably fall. Switch legs. Notice the differences in the standing leg between the two sides. Work toward balance. For a more challenging practice, work this pose with the eyes closed.

Final Relaxation/Corpse Pose (*Savasana*)

Savasana is a time to integrate the work of the practice in a state of "active relaxation." Lying on the ground, move your legs and arms slightly away from the body. If this is uncomfortable for your back, place a bolster or blanket under the knees, or bend them and rest the knees gently together, with feet wider apart. At this point the parasympathetic nervous system, which is active during relaxation, has a chance to become balanced.



Final Relaxation/Corpse Pose (*Savasana*)

Many beginning students are restless during this practice. Do not rush through the process. Corpse pose is the time in which there is absolutely nothing else to do but finish your practice by honoring the work you've just done.

In beginning any yoga practice, it is important to start small but be consistent. Practice doesn't have to be fancy or showy to be profound. Start small and the body, mind and spirit will want to come back. The ancient text of the *Yoga Sutras* by Pantajali talks about yoga being the cessation of the currents of the mind. Finding a smooth place to paddle and riding the waves, physically and mentally, is what yoga is all about. SK

Laurice D. Nemetz loves finding places to stand on her head when not sitting in a kayak. A mom of two boys, she lives in the Hudson Valley area of NY and teaches yoga classes, workshops, teacher training programs, and is an adjunct professor at Pace University and College of New Rochelle as well as the co-President of the YTA (Yoga Teachers Association) and a movement therapist. Lauri guides yoga and sea kayaking trips in the Hudson Valley, Canada, and Costa Rica and can be contacted via her website: www.wellnessbridge.com.

Kayak guide, Edgar Vargas, falling from Tree Pose

Laurice Nemetz