

CARE

YOGA MATTERS

By Elizabeth Wray



The angels are singing. Yoga allows you to tune in and listen.



HEART OPENING

LATELY I FIND I NEED TO DO A LOT of heart-opening poses. As in all matters of the heart, there are several levels of meaning, need, and desire at work here. On the physical level, I think I just need to prolong my morning get-out-of-bed stretch and counteract the rest of my waking hours spent hunching and slumping my way through the day. Think about how often the spine rounds forward and tension accumulates in the muscles of the upper back and shoulders: reading the newspaper at breakfast, driving, working at the computer, watching television, reading in bed. I perform none of these daily activities without some degree of droop and sag. I'm continually reeling my neck back in as I lurch

over the steering wheel, and right now, although I'm standing at my computer to write because it's a more comfortable position for me than sitting, I have to keep adjusting my neck and cervical spine up and back and open.

Opening the chest feels good; no wonder I have such a need to open. I grab a block or a bolster at least a couple of times a day, just to lay my back over one or the other, like some beneficent rack designed for stretching my body open and free of the torturous slouch it's prone to. Lying there, chest rather than head in the topmost position, chest rising and falling so obviously, I find it easier to bring my awareness to my breathing alone, and my

mind in response quiets down. Yet this open-chested position is hard to maintain out in the world.

I think of my friend A., who last week tried on a shirt of mine that I thought would look good on her. "No, it's not me," she said, looking at herself in the mirror. "I mean, I like it, but it's way too tight." A. hides behind loose clothes. She slouched as a girl, thinking herself too tall, a habit she continues. She was sexually assaulted when she was 18. She'd rather read than make love. She has spent a lifetime feeling ambivalent about her body. A.'s reluctance to open her chest to the world is something most women experience at least part of the time, if just for safety's sake, but

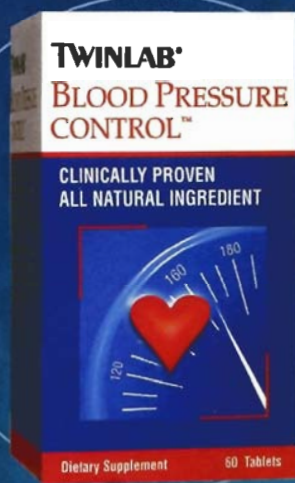
UPWARD-FACING DOG

- Lie on your stomach on your mat.
- Face points downward, feet are placed 12 inches apart, toes pointing straight back. Place your hands on the floor next to your waist, fingers forward.
- Leading with your sternum, raise your upper torso off the mat. Press your hands into the mat and lift your sternum as high as you can while bringing your pelvis toward your hands.
- Your hips should be lifted off the mat, thighs strong, and knees pulled up so they're not resting on the floor.
- Moving your shoulder blades into your back ribs, expand your chest and move your head back.

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

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Heart Opening, continued



more often because of a pain located in the heart area under layers of raw emotion.

I think of another old friend, who recently spent a week with me after two years fighting a major depression. She walked hunched. I was reminded of her years earlier, when she was 26 and writing a book about her absent dad and cutting herself off from conversation, how she used to eat dinner in her own private world, one leg folded up to her chest, her head and shoulders hunkered down over her knee, while the rest of us carried on. Yet her body yearns to be free of its heart burden. Last week, when we put on a CD of 1940s singers (her favorites), she threw her head back and danced.

Dancing is important in matters of the heart and the knots in the heart, which we all have, that yoga says must be untied for liberation to occur. The Egyptian hieroglyph for *ab*, or heart-soul, was a dancing figure, and as a verb *ab* meant to dance. The reference is to the mystic dance of life inside the body—the heartbeat. Similarly, in Hindu tradition, Shiva, the Lord of the Dance,

dances in a place called Chidambaram, the center of the universe, located within the human heart.

Yoga speaks of the spiritual heart—not the physical heart but the core of being, experienced in the heart region of the body. Thus, when my heart aches (and I'm sometimes in denial that it is aching), and my partner rubs my chest, I break down weeping. Likewise, it's a common story that people often take up yoga practice when their heart is aching, as I did when my mother was dying, and spend much of the first week or month or year crying in class when they assume heart-opening positions and the teacher gives them permission to let go.

It's impossible not to talk about the heart when writing about heart-opening practice. Yet I feel as if I'm standing on unstable ground—one foot sinking into the Swamp of Heartache, Heartbreak, the Disheartened, the Downhearted, Heavyhearted, and Hardhearted...and the other foot testing the ground in the Plain of the Hearty, the Take Heart, the Lighthearted, Warmhearted, Softhearted.

SUPPORTED BACKBEND

• Lie over a bolster so that your middle back is supported and your shoulders rest comfortably on the floor.

• Place another bolster under your shoulders and head to support the natural curve of the neck. (To open even further, use a folded blanket instead.)

• Bend your knees to protect your back and relax the abdomen.

• Make sure your chest is open and your ribs lift away from the abdomen.

• Rest your arms comfortably by your sides. Close your eyes and relax for 5–10 minutes, breathing slowly and evenly.



If you don't have bolsters, you can substitute a block, a rolled blanket, or a sleeping bag .



It's as if the heart is bipolar. I suspect it's the word "open-hearted" that's the key to uniting all the heart's pain and joy and restoring stability. But how do we learn to be openhearted?

"Opening has to come from the inside out, not the outside in," says yoga teacher Judith Lasater, Ph.D., author of *30 Essential Yoga Poses: For Beginning Students and Their Teachers*. "What opening really means is the willingness to be radically present—that is, open to your own feelings and those of others, in the moment. You use yoga poses and breathing so that you notice when you're present and when you're not, so that you can choose to be present."

In Sanskrit, the heart chakra is called *anahata*, meaning unhurt. I think of children and their easy openness and ability to be "radically present." Lasater says that opening is there in us already, as it was when we were children, and we just need to find it. "It's like a radio wave that you can't hear," Lasater says. "It's not that awareness opens your heart; it's that you become open to what's already there.

Right now, metaphorically speaking, the angels are singing. When you tune in to it, your heart opens."

Asanas remind your body to be present; they also allow you to move into positions of openness. The process is to lie down on the floor and put your body in an open, receptive position. This quiets the thinking brain. You follow the breath, become more present, let go of both your postural habits and of who you think you are, and you open up. Lasater explains how supported poses in particular can help us open. "If you support the body, you support the person," she says. "If you're in an open, held position, it's impossible for you not to let go. And when you let go, you open up." It's this supported open position I'm after with my bolster every day.

Yoga has many ways of getting at the heart and consciously spreading it open. Twists, side stretches, shoulder openers, and backbends massage the muscles that can restrict the feeling of openness in the heart area: those muscles surrounding the rib cage, along the back and spine, and those sup-

SUPPORTED BRIDGE

- Place one bolster along a wall and another perpendicular to the wall, with a folded blanket at the far end for your head.
- Sitting on the perpendicular bolster end nearest the wall, lie back until the middle of your back reaches the end of the bolster and your shoulders drop to the blanket. Rest your shoulders and head on the blanket.
- Stretch your legs toward the wall, putting your heels on the parallel bolster and touching your feet to the wall.
- Rest your arms at your sides. Close your eyes and relax for 5–10 minutes.
- To come out, bend your knees and roll to one side, pushing up to a seated position.

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Heart Opening, continued

porting the shoulders. I find release in many of these poses, but as a daily habit, I favor supported heart openers, such as Reclining Bound Angle pose (Supta Baddha Konasana), Legs-Up-the-Wall pose (Viparita Karani), and my favorite, Supported Backbend. These poses can be particularly helpful in times of loss and grief.

I taught my partner, Mary, Supported Backbend while her sister was dying this past winter. Mary is a squash player who finds yoga too slow and "stretchy" for her taste, but her body opened easily and quickly to this pose. She found both release and comfort in the pose up until her sister's death and after, as she learns to live with the loss. Last night she told me that while she was in Supported Backbend, eyes closed, she saw her sister's open eye. "It wasn't happy or sad," she said, "just open and looking. I wanted her eye to be there, and I wanted to keep looking."

The heart's job is profound. Powerful muscle, it circulates blood, oxygen, and lymphatic fluids. It pumps nourishment to every cell. Emotional center, it feels too much, or too little, and laments both states. Spiritual core, it beats its undeniable rhythm, calling the Lord of the Dance, you, and me to be radically present, to open to this moment, this life. ∞

Elizabeth Wray is a freelance writer who lives in San Francisco.

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