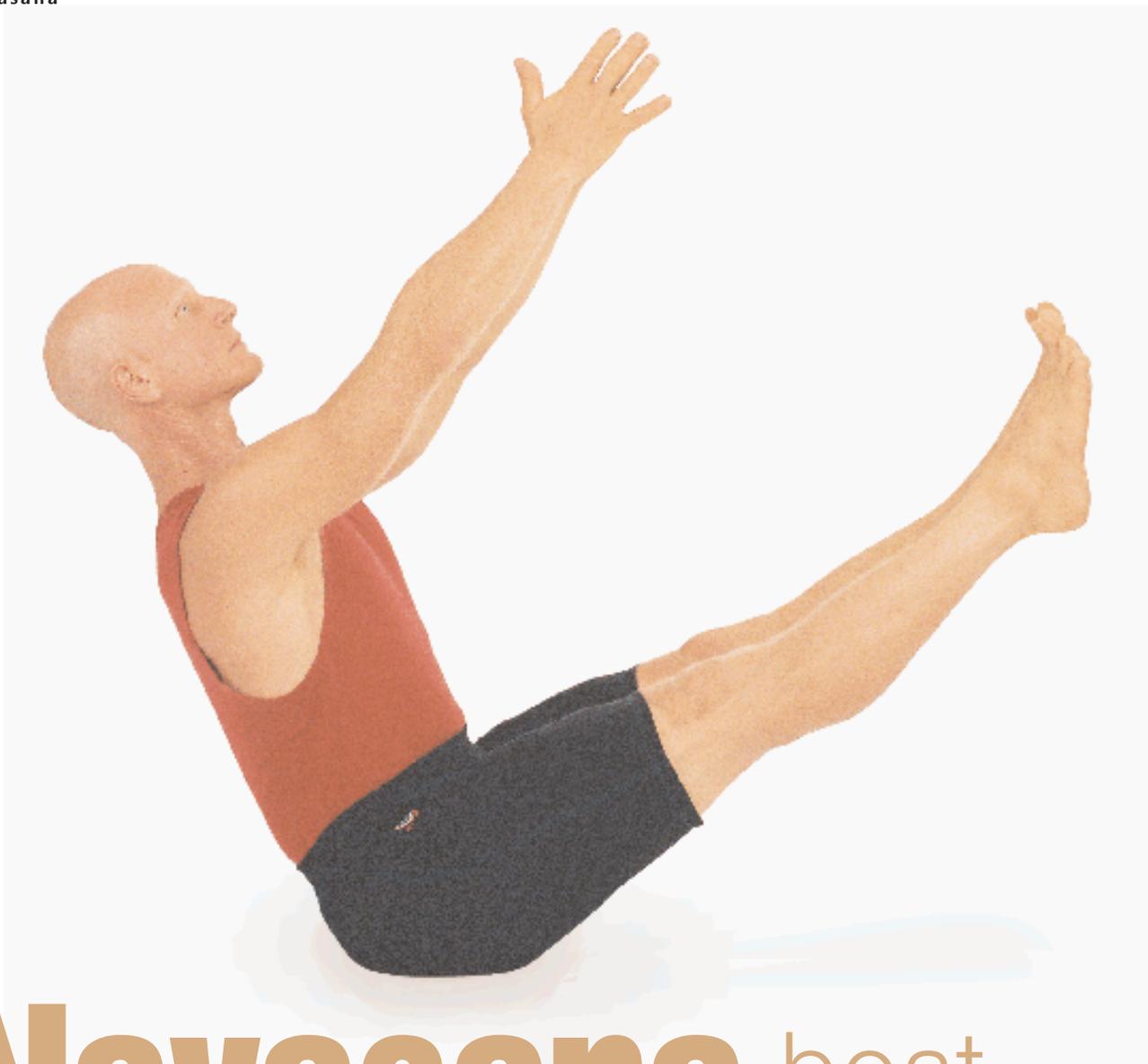


Navasana



Navasana

boat pose

by Adam Bornstein

Navasana speaks to us as if saying “Rise up from complacency and reclaim your dynamic inner power.” This is an awakening pose that can shift stagnant patterns and open the door to living life fully.

Each of us has so much potential, but for most of us only a small percentage is actualised, while much of it lies buried within. Sometimes it can feel that a lock has been placed on our vitality. Yoga gives us the keys to open up and reveal our radiant essence. With gratitude to my teachers, I offer this article with the hope that it will be instrumental in deepening our understanding of yoga.

Navasana, the Boat pose, is a challenging asana for many students. My aim in writing this article is to make Navasana accessible for all levels of practitioners. Because of its intense quality it is often not explored and experienced. It has many benefits ranging from strengthening and purifying the body to igniting the illuminating element of fire within us.

The power centre

The abdominal area is our centre of physical power, providing stamina and endurance. This staying power can provide the impetus to be present with what is, as well as to manifest change when desired.

The abdominal area is our centre of gravity. When this area awakens it has a stabilising effect on the mid-section as well as the entire skeleton. The belly area also supports our abdominal organs, aligns the pelvis, keeps the torso erect, supports the lumbar spine, and assists with breathing.

Navasana’s easier variations are therapeutic in rehabilitating back problems. Key muscles are strengthened and body awareness is accentuated. Combined with other asanas the Boat pose can help create a strong centre,

thus preventing spinal imbalance that can lead to pain and injury. As is always the case when approaching any physical practice, you need to use commonsense and consult a qualified professional if required.

Prana and agni

Navasana is one of my all-time favourites because of its potential to trigger an enlivening of the flow of *prana*, or vital energy. I have designed a sequence of poses that are called 'the fire in the belly series'. Navasana and some of its variations are at the core of the practices. This article describes some of those poses.

Navasana, while affecting our whole being, focuses its energy in the mid section of the torso. In yoga the abdominal area is regarded as being the storehouse of prana. The third chakra, Manipura, is the fire centre and is said to be the key to awakening qualities and states of being such as vitality, willpower and boundless flowing energy.

Ayurveda, the sister science of yoga, talks about the different levels of *agni* (fire). On the physical plane we have *jathara agni*, the digestive fire. It resides in the abdomen, mostly in the small intestine. It is important for digestion, elimination, and for nourishing the body. When jathara agni burns bright the eyes are clear, and the skin is smooth and radiant.

David Frawley, in his excellent book *Yoga and Ayurveda*, explains that the most important agni in yoga is prana agni. In his words, "prana agni is the most powerful agni. It can purify the subtle body to allow for the inner experiences of yoga to come forth. Until that is developed, the higher aspects of yoga cannot unfold."

The practices of *asana* (postures), *bandha* (internal locks) and *pranayama* (breath control) work directly on jathara and prana agni. The purification and directed focus of asana balances and integrates jathara agni. Pranayama, specifically breath retention following inhalation, is said to increase prana agni, and the bandhas assist both jathara and prana agni.

Navasana acts like a key to powerfully switch on the inner fire of prana. Combined with Ujjayi pranayama and concentration it can literally be like a boat to carry us across the sea of delusion.

Emotions

The abdomen is also said to be a gathering place for emotions, both constructive and

destructive. Fear, anger and anxiety, as well as confidence, calmness and stillness can be experienced in the belly. Recent research by a well respected medical doctor, Michael Gershon, has shown that we have more nerve cells in the gut than in all the remainder of the peripheral nervous system combined. He likened this system of nerves to a 'second brain', as it both works independently of the brain yet also affects it profoundly.

We all have 'gut feelings' that alert us instinctually when we are in an unsafe environment or in need of guidance. It has now been proven scientifically that this is also a physiological reality.

Navasana can help us to sensitively attune to our inner voice in small ways, as well as when making life changing decisions. Yoga masters have said that our intuition is the whisper of our soul quietly guiding us from within.

Practice tips

It's good to keep in mind that progress in yoga is directional. Begin with the simple strengthening flow as explained below.

Remember the importance of the breath; allow it to be the bridge between body and mind. Feel the seamless connection between your body and the feedback arising in the field of awareness. Respond appropriately to your body's messages, always backing off, holding, or going further as a response to the communication from the body – not because of self-created pressure to meet an external goal.

If you experience pain in the lower back or sacroiliac joints, you will need to reassess how and what you are doing. In general, bending your knees in the completed pose will act to take pressure off the lumbar spine.

If you have tight hamstrings, apply yourself in poses such as Supta Padangusthasana (Supine hand to foot pose) and Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-facing dog pose) to lengthen the hamstrings so your spine and pelvis can remain in neutral, thus maintaining natural spinal curves whilst in Navasana.

If your back muscles are weak and front shoulders and chest are tight it will be important to consistently practise poses such as Setu Bandhasana (Bridge pose) and Salabhasana (Locust pose) to influence the chest to open through the strengthening action of the middle back muscles.

Navasana, the Boat pose, is a challenging asana for many students.

Benefits of Navasana:

- Strengthens abdominal muscles
- Strengthens hip flexors – iliopsoas and quadriceps
- Strengthens the adductor muscles of the inner thighs
- Strengthens spinal muscles, specifically erector spinae, quadratus lumborum, lower trapezius, transversospinalis (small network of muscles that connect together each individual vertebra)
- Because of its strengthening and stabilising influence, it can help to prevent back problems and also to rectify existing long-term imbalances
- Enhances concentration, thus strengthening the mind
- Generates prana flow through the body
- Builds willpower, determination and self-control
- Seals our energy field and prevents prana from leaking out, thereby building inner strength

Contraindications:

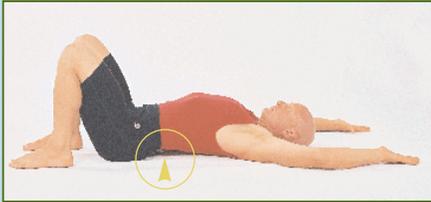
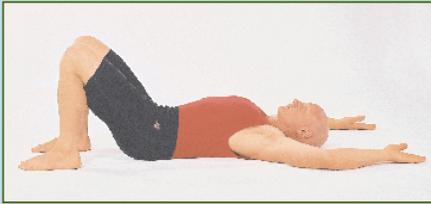
- After the first trimester of pregnancy.
- Recent abdominal surgery.
- High blood pressure (consult your doctor).
- Acute lumbar pain (easy variations may help after acute phase).
- Backache – do easy variations only, with lumbar spine in contact with the floor.
- Excessively turned under coccyx (tailbone).

References:

Yoga and Ayurveda by David Frawley, Lotus Press
Information about research work of Dr Michael Gershon taken from *Yoga Journal* article, March/April 2001

Navasana

<Pelvic Tilts>



Pelvic Tilts are an excellent warm-up for Navasana – physically, mentally and energetically. Lie down on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor parallel and the same distance apart as the knees. As you exhale, press the lumbar spine firmly

flat to the floor. Feel how the lower spine lengthens and the abdomen contracts, lifting the pubic bone up towards the chest.

As you inhale, roll up onto the sacrum, lifting the lumbar spine slightly away from the floor. Feel how the belly lengthens as the lower spine contracts. Observe how the pubic bone draws down towards the floor between the thighs.

Repeat a few times, paying close attention to moving with the breath. It is important not to bounce between the two positions; instead, make the transition slowly, exploring the whole area between the lumbar and sacrum as well as the space between the pubic bone and chest.

<Supta Navasana – Supine Boat Pose>

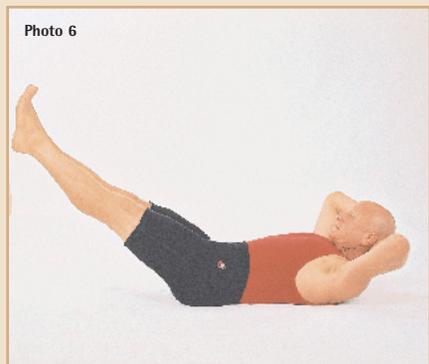
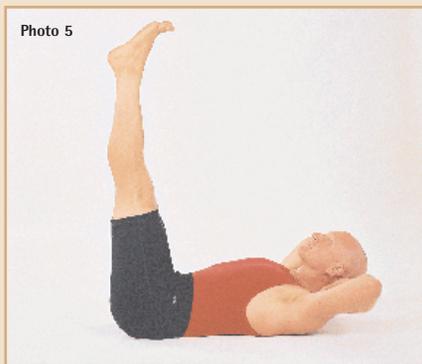
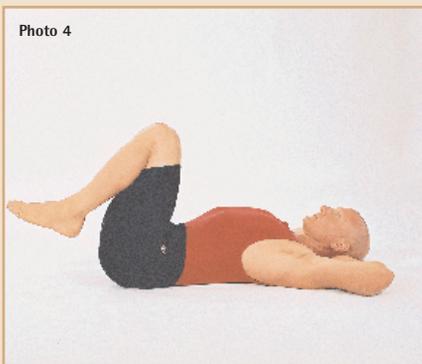
This is a great pose to include in all your yoga sessions, as it warms and energises the abdominal area. I am demonstrating with a block between my thighs to assist in strengthening and stabilising the mid section.



From the same position as above, place your palms on the thighs with elbows on the floor. As you exhale slowly bring the chin up towards the chest peeling the shoulders off the floor. Simultaneously slide your palms up the thighs to the knees. Actively squeeze the abdomen in and press the lumbar spine to the floor. Inhale and return to the starting position, again lying on your back with palms on upper thighs and elbows on the floor. Repeat a few times until you feel the fire being lit in the belly.

Now look at holding the lifted position, breathing into the chest, pressing the lumbar area down and lifting hands off the knees with palms facing in. To increase the intensity, scoop the tailbone under and lift the tailbone away from the floor. Be sure the hands are held wide enough apart to allow for an open chest. This pose brings an applied understanding to the power of the abdominal muscles as a stabilising force. We are beginning to connect with the underlying pranic storehouse within.

<Ardha Navasana – Half Boat Pose>



Let's graduate to the next progressive step in our sequence. Now that we are feeling the role of the abdominal area we turn our awareness to the hip flexors. The abdominal muscles will continue their supporting role keeping the pelvis in a safe position. The hip flexors will engage to lift the legs. This will be safe for most people as the floor will support the lumbar spine.

Photo 4: Lying on the back, exhale and draw the knees into the chest. Interlace the hands behind the head, opening your elbows out to the sides. Take a breath in and spread your

weight down the entire spine, lengthening it into the floor all the way to the sacrum.

Photo 5: As you exhale, lift the legs straight up and if it feels right lift your head and elbows off the floor. Inhale the knees into the chest and the head back to the floor. Repeat a few times, moving with the breath as described.

Photo 6: To practise the next phase safely you will need to keep your lumbar spine flat into the floor. Continue with the sequence above until you have sufficient strength to explore this next step. Begin as in photo 4. On the exhalation

squeeze the thighs towards each other and extend the legs out at a diagonal as you bring the chin up towards the breastbone.

Inhale the knees into the chest and the head back to the floor. Repeat a few times, moving with the breath. If you want to hold the upward position, make sure the lumbar is pressing down through the pulling-in action of the abdomen. Practise enough repetitions that you feel a warm glow in the abdominal area. Complete the sequence by hugging the knees into the chest.

<Navasana – Boat Pose>

This sequence introduces us to the completed pose in a graceful unfolding flow. It allows room for all levels of practitioners to partake in the richness and power of Navasana. Challenge yourself step by step into the asana according to your inner guidance. Remember to connect with your breath as you enter, hold, and exit from the pose.

Photo 7

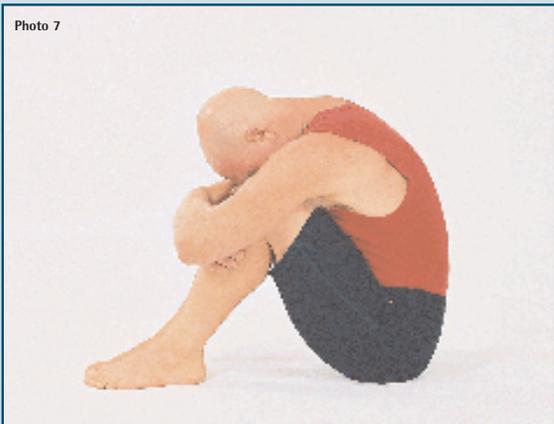


Photo 7: Sit up with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Wrap your arms around the knees and release your head down. Imagine that you are a flower bud tightly folded into yourself. Breathe here, centring your concentration within.

Photo 8

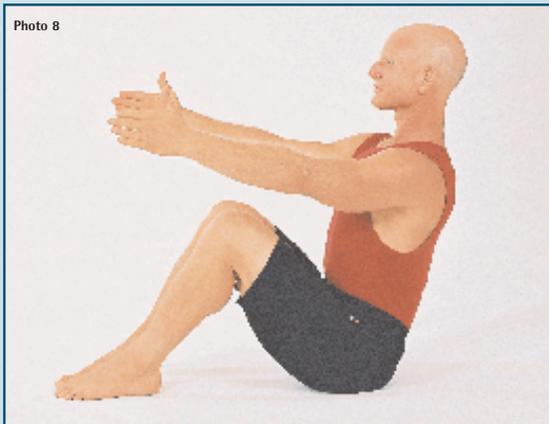


Photo 8: Inhaling, slowly unfurl your body-bud, opening arms from the centre and out in front of the chest about shoulder width apart. Lean back, keeping feet on the floor, feeling both your abdomen and spinal muscles stabilising your pose. Exhaling, return to your starting position. Repeat a few times, immersing yourself in the folding (exhaling) and unfolding (inhaling) movements. Rest for a moment or two in the bud position.

Photo 9

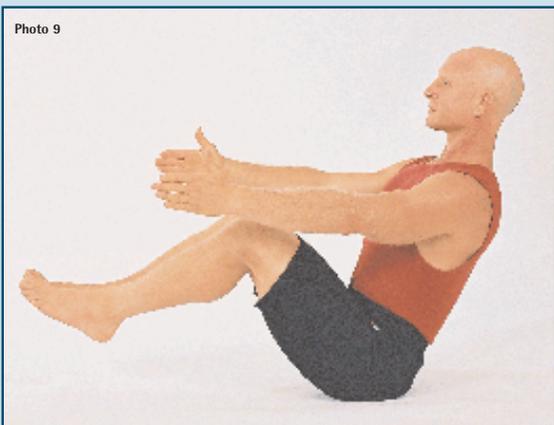


Photo 9: To progress further, begin once again from photo 7. This time lean back a bit further and lift your feet off the floor, engaging your entire mid-section and thighs to support the asana. You have the option to have a block between the thighs, which will have the effect of drawing the inner legs towards the midline. Keep the knees bent, with legs and feet together. Exhaling, return to the starting position (photo 7). Gradually work on holding the pose for a few breaths, beginning with two breaths and progressing up to 10 breaths before attempting the next variation below. Rest in the beginning position or move into the counter pose shown in photos 12 and 13.

Photo 10

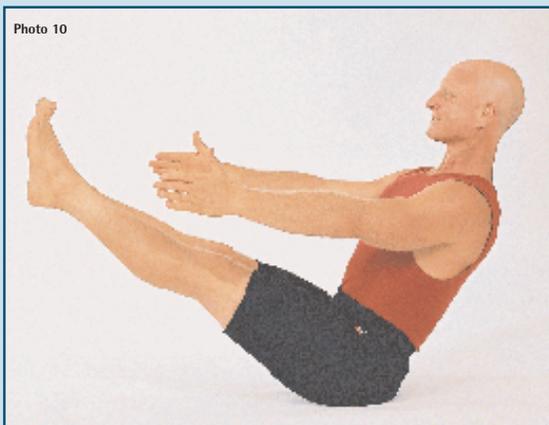


Photo 10: When you feel steady and attuned to your body through the above variations, work towards straightening the legs as you lean back. Lift the breastbone, lower the shoulders, and maintain the natural curves of your spine as you move into and hold this dynamic pose. Practise moving into the finished pose from the first position (photo 7) and back again a few times. Slowly progress to holding the asana with calm steady gaze, smooth breathing and full body awareness. Begin with two breaths and work up to 12 breaths.

If you are wondering about the position of your spine, you can either ask a friend to look at you from the side or place the back of your hand on the lumbar spine to know for sure whether you are collapsing the lumbar backwards or extending it upward.

Navasana

<Paripurna Navasana – Full Boat Pose>

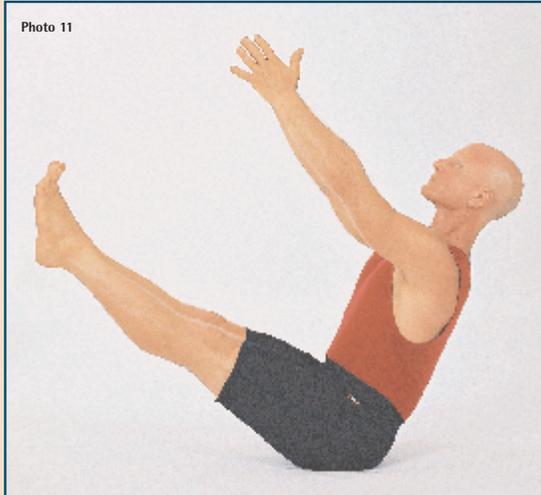


Photo 11: This variation is shared that it might inspire you to deepen the basic version shown in photo 10. This is for those practitioners who are strong of body and who can honestly assess their readiness for this pose. You will need to maintain clear communication between body and mind and feel the breath energy empowering the asana.

Draw the inner thighs in towards the mid line, actively ascend upwards through the spine from the tailbone through the crown of the head. Feel the front, sides, and back of your mid section equally engaged to hold you stable. Feel the kidney area lift up as the heart opens in fullness and inner joy.

Can you feel an exalted experience arising from deep within? The palms draw magnetically together as the eyes softly gaze past the thumbs into eternity. Breathe here and break free the shackles surrounding your life force. Concentrate, breathe, and gather all your prana within the vessel of your body.

Begin with holding for a few breaths and then progress up to holding for 12 breaths. When you are ready, slowly release out of the pose. Lie on your back hugging knees into chest.

Place the feet on the floor and savour the after-effects. Tune into the spreading, purifying presence within you. Experience the completeness of your self. When you are ready, practise the counter pose, right.

Conclusion

Navasana is a pose that can transcend physical matter and leave an uplifting impact on consciousness. Experiment on your own bodily vessel and see what happens.

Self-respect can be applied in two different ways.

1. Don't force and push through your limitations. Aggression will only retard long-lasting progress. Instead slowly and consistently, as you become stronger, increase the repetitions or the holding

time of the simple variations before graduating to the more intense poses.

2. Love your self enough to get off the couch and go for it! Apply your concentration and devotion to yoga practise, adhere to a routine, be courageous, and break free from lethargy.

As you practise Navasana, apply yourself 100 per cent, with awareness and focused intention. Relish the feeling of inner warmth arising from a place deep within the belly and saturating out to the periphery of the

<counterpose one Jathara Parvrittasana – Revolved Belly Pose>

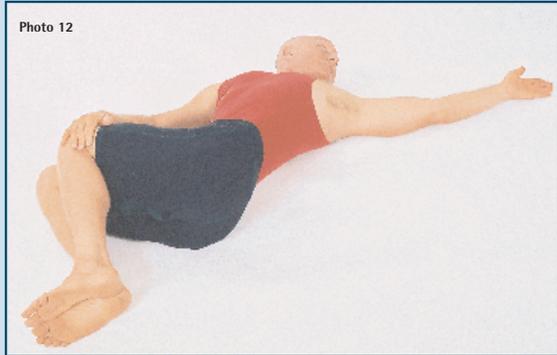


Photo 12: Lie on your back with knees into the chest and open the arms out to the sides in a T position. On an exhaling breath slowly release the knees over to the right. Place your right hand on your left knee and gently turn your head to the left. Take a few diaphragmatic breaths and feel the glow in your belly harmoniously radiate out to quietly fill your body and mind.

Repeat on the other side.

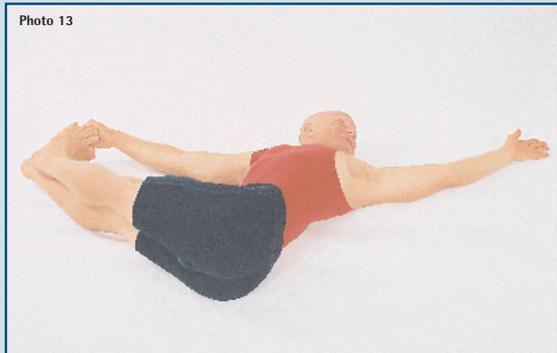


Photo 13: This straight leg variation is an option for those practitioners who are more flexible. Do your best to maintain length through both sides of the spinal column.

Finish your practice with a few minutes in Savasana (Corpse pose). This will balance your prana and prepare you for re-entry into your day.

skin. Embody this expanding energy radiating out like the rays of the dawning sun. Feel the fire purifying any old concepts of who you think you are. Identify more with awareness and breath. Come into the sunlight of your own radiant being.

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