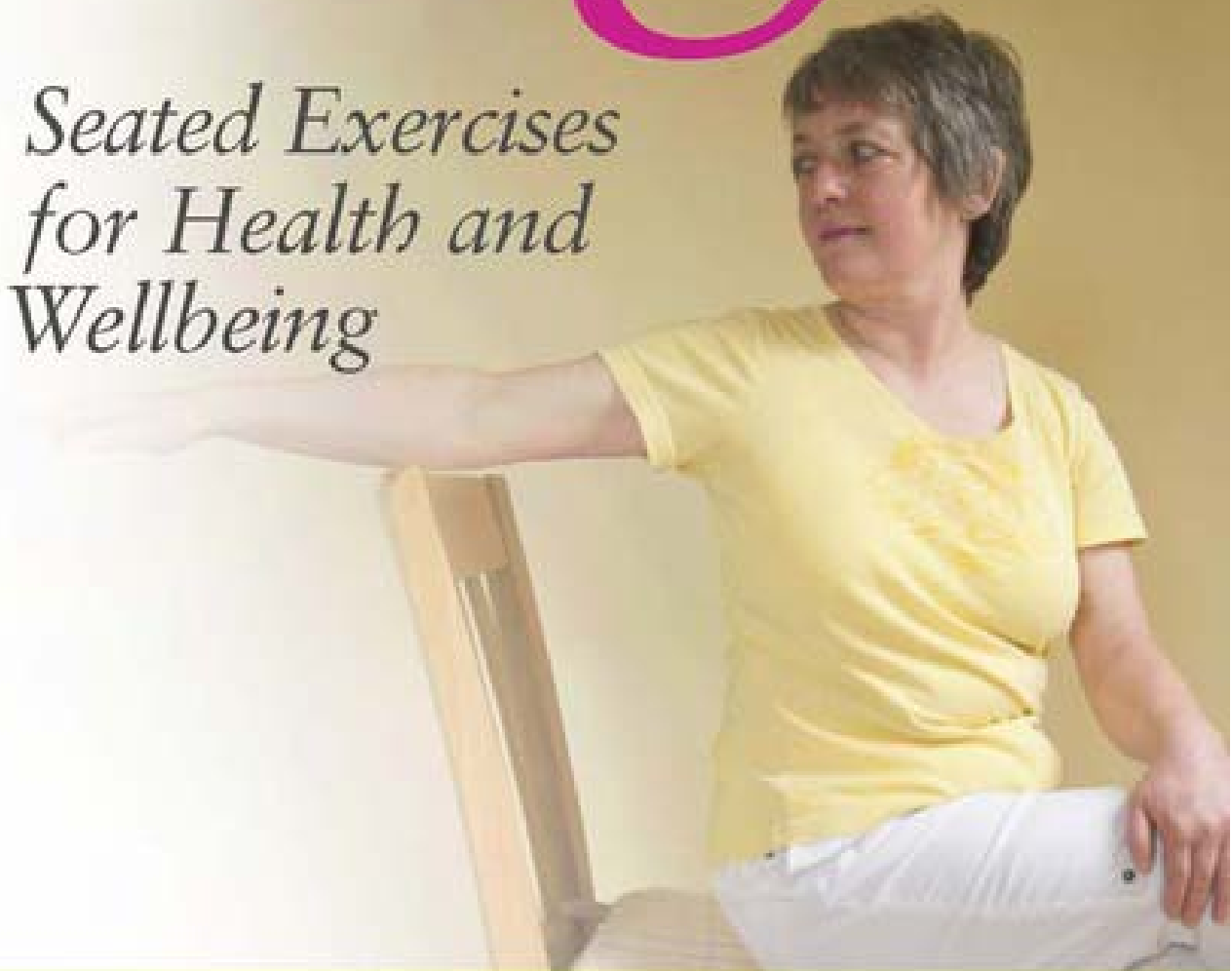


# Chair Yoga

*Seated Exercises  
for Health and  
Wellbeing*





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# Chair Yoga

*Seated Exercises for Health and Wellbeing*

Edeltraud Rohnfeld

Translated by Anne Oppenheimer



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*For Erika Hammerström and a very particular angel*



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Yoga DVDs (in English and German) by the author can be ordered by phone on (00 353) 86 365 6209, from [www.yoga-clare.com](http://www.yoga-clare.com) or by e-mail.

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# INTRODUCTION

## ■ *What is chair yoga?*

The history of yoga goes back more than 5000 years. It began with wise Indian hermits who studied animal behaviour, seeking to understand the secret of long life. Why does a tortoise live for 100 years or more, but a mouse only three to five years? In question was the mystery of eternal life, the fundamental pillars of which appeared to be freedom from stress, slow, deep breathing, regular exercise in fresh air, good nourishment and special methods of purification.

The wise men of India, called *rishis*, added ethical and moral rules for the human mind to this wisdom concerning the health of the body. Rectitude, non-violence and devotion to the service of mankind were a few of their fundamental principles. And so the yoga pathway came into being. The word 'yoga' is derived from '*yui*, to join', and means the union or harmony of body, mind and spirit.

Yoga has been taught for thousands of years. At first it was intended only as a way for India's spiritual elite, for the best of the best. The doctrine remained secret. But in the twentieth century, not least by means of British colonialism in India, the gateway of knowledge was opened up to the West. The first English books on yoga appeared, and in the 1940s yoga as a means to healthy living reached Germany too. In the 1960s it was popularized through the hippy movement.

In the meantime, yoga, together with Ayurveda, the science of longevity, has gained recognition as a form of bodywork, especially in the healthy living movement.

Chair yoga is relatively new. It was first developed in the 1980s by Erika Hammerström – and so yoga for the strong became yoga for the less strong. Central to this form of yoga are exercises that are suitable for people who want

to do something about their health and wellbeing, but can no longer sit on a mat for hours in the lotus position, or no longer want to do headstands.

This book shows for the first time how many yoga exercises can be done sitting on a chair – exercises to activate the feet, legs, arms and hands, back, neck region, eyes and even the brain – so that those with restricted mobility no longer need give up yoga, but instead, by means of movement, can take their destiny in their hands and improve their circulation, deliver more oxygen to their cells and so gradually increase mobility and enhance brain function.

The yoga exercises that I introduce in this book can be done by almost anyone, as the approach is easy to understand and the way of doing the exercises, although much simplified, is still very effective. Whether you are old or young, whether work and/or family make heavy demands on your time or you can mostly decide for yourself how to spend your day, this kind of yoga is easy for anyone to do, as it requires no special conditions and can even be done in many everyday situations. The only genuine requirements are a chair or other means of sitting, a reasonably quiet space, indoors – or, in fine weather, outdoors – and comfortable clothing in which you can move and breathe easily.

The exercises can be done alone, at home or in a yoga group. The latter has the advantages of increasing motivation and offering the opportunity to meet new people. If you would like to learn yoga in a group, look for a teacher you like, and whose teaching appeals to you. Learning yoga in a group is more fun, and you will be keener to attend classes regularly. Avoid choosing a dogmatic teacher, for yoga has nothing to do with dogma. If you are one of those people who don't have time to attend a yoga group regularly, because your work is too demanding or you travel a lot, then this book will prompt you to practise during your journey or breaks at work. You can be flexible with this kind of yoga. Certain exercises can be done sitting on the train or aeroplane, or during a break in a car journey. Likewise, you can make tiresome waiting time at the doctor's or the bus stop more pleasant by doing a few exercises. On a seat in the park or your own garden you can make good use of the exercises, and time after work can be made more enjoyable by means of the relaxation that they bring.

The exercises in this book have been adapted in such a way that you need have no reservations about trying them, however stiff-jointed you are. The effect will be marked, and the risk of injury is slight. If you are only able to do the exercises a bit at a time, because that's the only way your body will let you, you will still have the taste of success. Yoga exercises should never be done in an acrobatic or mechanical way, but rather in a state of peace – which means a state not just of physical calm, but also of mental peace, as you enjoy spending time on an exercise. We say in yoga: a small stimulus is sufficient. Each yoga exercise should be carried out within the pain threshold, without pressure or strain.



I have structured this book in the way I run my yoga classes: we begin with extensive stretching and breathing exercises. Then we do exercises for the feet and legs, followed by ones for the hands, arms and back. Next comes the neck and shoulder region, and finally we go on to the head. To finish comes relaxation: we go through the whole body, consciously relaxing each part.

This procedure is the well-proven structure that I use in my classes, but it is by no means obligatory. All the same, you shouldn't do any exercises without first doing the stretching and breathing exercises, because conscious stretching of the whole body improves energy flow, and the breathing exercises calm your thoughts.

If you practise regularly, you will very soon feel and enjoy the effect.

## ■ *Why do yoga today?*

We humans have this in common: we all breathe the same air and we would like to be happy and enjoy life. The basic need to find pleasure in life presupposes a sense of wellbeing and of being at one with the things we do. Too much stress and too many problems cause lassitude, fatigue and lack of drive. Chronic stress can have this effect even on the things we actually like to do.

Yoga teaches that the place of inner peace and composure, where we can draw again and again on fresh reserves of courage and power, lies ultimately within ourselves. Of course, we can also keep looking for this state in the external world – a beautiful spot in nature, a long walk in the woods, a holiday by the sea. But which of us has time to go walking in the woods almost every day? Days off are numbered, and enough time has to be reserved for one's family or other obligations during those precious days of freedom. Therefore it's important to be able to allow regular time for rest in everyday life. Then you can learn to manage stress in a different way, and to stay calm even in trying situations.

I myself learned yoga as a young girl, at a time when I was going through a difficult phase, feeling disorientated after a six-month spell abroad. I wanted to help others, but knew that first I needed help and support myself.

Discovering yoga was a hugely important milestone in my life. At last I seemed to find the answers to many inner questions. I sensed that the yoga exercises were making me more aware and clearer in myself. I discovered more stability and composure in myself. I became more conscious of my body, and could feel more clearly whether my posture was upright as I walked, or whether my shoulders were hunching forwards because of the burden of problems I was carrying. After every yoga class I felt fresh, good humoured and well balanced, and had a different

attitude to life and its challenges. I could also feel the joy of living rising in me. My social contacts became deeper, and my willingness to take risks increased.

From this time on, I practised the yoga exercises regularly. The strongest motivator for this was the wonderful sense of wellbeing during and after my hour of yoga. Just as I could feel the increased flow in my body after each exercise, so too I could go more with the flow of life. I realized that I had (and have) no influence over certain things, and stopped fretting inwardly about it. On the other hand, I began to focus on the things that I could influence in my life, and this gave me an increased sense of inner security and a new attitude to the world. It became clear to me how much my happiness lies in my own hands, and the motivation to make my life as good and beautiful as possible constantly increased. (This book is a contribution to it.)

I would like to encourage you, dear readers, to learn yoga not only for the sake of your own health, but also as a means of increasing your love of life, and your sense of refreshment and inner peace. If you feel well in your psyche, your body will also be more healthy and resilient. We would all like to be happier. Who is stopping you, apart from you yourself? Certainly, our partner is not always the person we would like them to be – likewise the children, our parents, people in authority, colleagues and friends. We can complain for the rest of our lives that people aren't the way we would like them to be – but with the help of yoga we can also learn to get along with our fellow human beings in a more understanding and loving way because, through yoga, we are practising the same way of getting along with ourselves.

All of us, nowadays, have stress aplenty, tasks that are too demanding, conflicts that seem too difficult to solve. Even children, in our society, suffer many demands, through stress at school, and fear of not being good enough and becoming an outsider. Because of the challenges we face in our achievement-orientated society, we quickly feel pushed into a corner where we keep having to struggle, often alone. Even – or perhaps especially – the people close to us challenge or provoke us over and over again. Yoga can be very helpful for enduring all these demands and finding the ability to meet them cheerfully. I myself couldn't imagine my life without yoga, quite apart from the fact that I also teach it.

If you are learning yoga, it's important not to do so in the belief that you have to have a slim and athletic body, or be a particular age, a vegetarian or a non-smoker. Simply start with the exercises and observe what happens. Just enter into that adventure. To begin with, three or five exercises are enough, but these should be done with real concentration and without external distractions. Do these exercises without a sense of pressure – and especially without a sense of pressure to succeed. Do them in the manner your body itself allows, and don't judge yourself if you don't succeed with an exercise in the way that you would

like. The human body understands more quickly than you think. If you do the exercises regularly for a while, you will feel your body recalling them, and how much easier they become.

Don't force anything. Letting go and letting be are two fundamental rules for joyful yoga. If you find this difficult, practise it consciously. You will soon find that the positive value of letting go and letting be has a healing effect on your everyday life as well.

Be patient with yourself. Don't cling to the expectation of heightened body awareness straight away. This feeling comes in its own time – perhaps when you least expect it.

If you are a smoker and would like to end or reduce the habit, then do the breathing exercises very regularly for a while, once or twice a day, and just don't have the cigarette you want. Learn to let go by exhaling consciously. Do the breathing exercises, say, when you're walking in the woods as well. It may be that the desire for a cigarette will diminish more quickly than you think.

It's the same with coffee, alcohol and other drugs. Once you discover this sense of being carried and contained in yourself, your inner stability can grow and your self-awareness increases. Your perception becomes more sensitive, your sense of the essential keener, moodiness decreases. You sleep more deeply at night, and awake more refreshed. Your pleasure in life increases.

Another aspect of yoga is that it teaches the ability to be consciously in the present. Notice your own thoughts, and what you and others are saying in conversation. Many people, for much of the time, inhabit the past or the future. In today's hectic way of life, the magic of the moment is often lost. It goes unnoticed. This moment – right now – never returns just the way it is. This moment, the present, is all we really have. The past is gone, with what belongs to it, and the future is a secret – perhaps also a gift.

With regular practice of yoga and relaxation you can learn to enjoy and value the present – this very moment. I wish you much fun and pleasure in reading, and in doing the exercises.

## ■ *The exercises: General rules*

Don't practise yoga with a full stomach, but one hour after a light meal and about two hours after a larger one.

After each exercise, take time to feel the effect. As you do so, focus on the parts of the body that have been moving, and/or on simply breathing in and out. To begin with, you may find it difficult to concentrate solely on the breath – but this

too is just a matter of practice. Gradually you'll notice that it's getting easier not to follow every thought that has nothing to do with the exercise you are doing. The more you can concentrate on your breath during the intervals for rest, the more inner peace you will feel and the more powerful will be the effect of each exercise. (And you will see that observing this is a matter of great importance.)

The exercises should be done in a well-ventilated space with an agreeable temperature. External noise should, as far as possible, be kept to a minimum.

In fine weather, I recommend doing your yoga session outdoors (albeit avoiding direct sunlight). When you have found a lovely spot in natural surroundings, you will discover the delight of relaxing to the twittering of birds, the rustling of a gentle breeze or the sound of the sea. A yoga session in the open air can be a special pleasure!

It's best not to bath, shower or swim straight after a yoga session, as yoga stimulates the flow of blood to the internal organs. Bathing, showering or swimming carries the blood back to the surface of the body, reversing the effect of the yoga exercises. Wait for an hour or two, and then you can take a bath or go for a swim.

In most of the exercises described here, there is reference to breathing. As you do each exercise, pay attention to correct inhalation and exhalation. (If, in some exercises, there is no further reference to the breath, just let it flow in and out.)

Don't answer any phone calls during your yoga session. It's best to leave the phone off the hook, or let the answering machine record the call. Interruptions would disturb the process of finding inner calm and letting go. Make sure, before you start, that you will be disturbed as little as possible. Then you will be able to relax all the more.

Make your yoga class a regular weekly event with a group where you can feel at ease and connect socially, and/or do the exercises regularly at home, as an act of self-love and self-discovery. For this, DVDs can be ordered directly from the author.