

Micro Vinyasas
for alignment and mindful movement

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This thesis project proposes a series of subtle, isolated movements of the body—called micro vinyasas—to aid yoga students in their alignment and to make them more mindful of how they are moving in space. This work is strongly inspired by the somatic practice proposed by Thomas Hanna that he articulates in his book *Somatics*. It also draws on the discussion of release valves as outlined by Gary Kraftsow in *Yoga for Wellness* and uses the most common of those misalignments as the primary area of study for this project. This work is informed by anatomical alignment principles, as outlined in anatomical manuals, and builds upon the alignment cues for asanas from our Prairie Yoga 200-hour teacher manual. It also draws on fundamental principles of the body’s orientation in space from Laban Movement Analysis, specifically outlined in Rudolf Laban’s *Choreutics*. The focus of this project is to provide simple exercises and cues for students to improve their alignment at the most fundamental levels, so this work emphasizes exercises for a few key asanas and shapes. This choice will make the work accessible to students of all levels and also makes these exercises easily translatable to more advanced or complex poses that make use of the same alignment principles. The design of each exercise is intended to help the student better understand and adjust their own alignment through verbal cues and no hands-on assists, which makes this work easier to convey simultaneously to a large group of students and makes the more subtle work of deep and fundamental alignment changes accessible even to students who are not comfortable with touch. To increase the flexibility of the ways that teachers and students can apply this work, I also identify exercises for each asana and shape that can be explored in more detail through private study (or the shifting of students to a wall) as well as exercises that could be incorporated into the normal flow of a group class.

Approach to movement:

Kraftsow defines release valves as the “compensatory mechanisms that occur when we are unable to stabilize a part of the body because of excessive mobility or restriction, habitual

movement patterns, or lack of understanding and/or attention” and he gives these patterns extensive attention in his book because the ability to counter these mechanisms “is so fundamental to achieving the benefits of asana practice” (5). One of the challenges for students in identifying their own release valves is the ability to notice or feel those compensatory mechanisms in the first place. Occasionally this challenge can be compensated for through clear cueing in yoga classes and breaking down poses for students. In other cases, students are unaware that they are engaging certain release valves at all. This idea is something that Hanna develops extensively in his book *Somatics*. His book provides exercises and methods to treat what he calls “sensory-motor amnesia (SMA),” an issue of the nervous system which he defines as a “memory loss of how certain muscles groups feel and how to control them” (xiii). Much of his work focuses on simple exercises where the body flows back and forth between two simple poses and encourages the mover to notice the subtle changes the body undergoes in those positions. Hanna calls this a “re-programming” of the sensory-motor system (xiii), an approach that guides my micro vinyasas as well.

To further assist with a clear cueing model and to make the exercises as simple and universal as possible, I focus on movement in simple directions based on the principles of spatial orientation from Rudolf Laban. He divides the most fundamental of movements (of an individual limb, the trunk, or the whole body) into three main dimensions. Length isolates movement up or down into verticality, and can lead to an isolation of muscle flexion and extension. Breadth isolates movement that crosses or opens away from the midline (right or left), and can lead to an isolation of muscle adduction and abduction or internal and external rotation. Depth isolates movement forward or backwards sagittally, and can also include muscle flexion and extension, of the spine especially (11). When these three spatial pulls—into verticality, horizontality, or depth—are combined, the directions of movements get more complex, but this project will focus overall on the isolation of movement along one dimension at a time to help the student notice the pathway.

This focus will help to address what Hanna refers to as a “distorted body image” which he also considers a significant aspect of sensory-motor amnesia (110). He points out that the brain begins to register misalignment as “normal” when these patterns become the body’s common posture. Personally, I have found this to be the case with alignment of the trunk and spine, especially when sitting for meditation. The weight of all my torso, or sections of it, frequently

shifts forward, which feels “aligned” but which puts greater stress on the spinal column. As a result, my series of micro vinyas are not designed as a series of movements from the mover’s misaligned posture to the “correct” posture, but rather as a series of movements that slide past the proper alignment towards oppositional poles in verticality, horizontality, or depth. By safely having the student initially move past the ideal alignment, they can begin to feel the points of misalignment in their body. And, by progressively decreasing the range of motion on either side of the ideal posture like a pendulum losing momentum, the student will eventually be able to reduce their distorted body image and minimize release valves on their own.

Common release valves and asana case studies:

Kraftsow identifies common release valves, in particular, for forward bends, backward bends, twists, lateral bends, and extension. Running through these categories of asanas are a few commonalities, which will be the focus of this project. First, Kraftsow frequently identifies deviations from the traditional “Tadasana” alignment. The most common deviation there is excessive movement of the pelvis and/or shoulders forward and/or backward (i.e., sagittal displacement). Secondly, Kraftsow frequently identifies an internal or external rotation of legs/feet in asanas (i.e. horizontal displacement). Finally, he frequently points to a lack of head and/or shoulder integration with the rest of the body. As a result, a few fundamental yoga poses and their re-occurring shapes will be the focus for my micro viny exercises.

Tadasana, Trikonasana, Utkatasana, Savasana, and seated poses (Sukhasana, Siddhasana, Dandasana, and Upavista Konasana) are the targeted asanas of this project. Learning these exercises in these asanas allows for easy translation to other asanas with similar shapes.

Micro vinyasa exercises:

Teachers and students can use these exercises in two different ways. Many of them involve a Tadasana-based set-up, frequently at a wall. These sets can be of use to break down a particular pose and emphasize in more detail the particular shape and alignment of a pose. The rest are movements that can be executed while in the pose on the mat, which is less disruptive to the flow of a class. Once the student has been set up in the pose, they can begin to move through the micro viny. Accompanying images and arrows help to indicate the shape of the exercises’ polar

opposite “endpoints” and the direction of movement, but the images themselves do not always reveal dramatic variations as the movements should be subtle so not to cause pain or injury.

1. For the arms and shoulders: adduction/abduction



- **Version at the wall:**

Set up: Stand perpendicular to the wall, arms distance.

Come into Tadasana. Find/maintain stability in Tadasana feet. Bring the hand closest to the wall onto the wall, palm flat, fingers facing up towards the ceiling, at shoulder height or slightly higher.

Cues: Inhale, pivot torso away from the wall, creating more space in the armpit (adduction). Notice how this moves the scapula more onto the back, towards the spine. Continue to keep the hand and arm stable so that the movement initiates from the upper back.

Exhale, pivot torso away from the torso, creating less space in the armpit (abduction).

Notice how this moves the scapula away from the midline, broadening the back.

Continue to maintain stability in the arm.

Continue to alternate between these two, noticing the moment in the middle where hand, arm, and shoulder girdle are all in alignment.

- **Version on the mat:**

Set up in Tadasana:

Come into Tadasana. Find/maintain stability in Tadasana feet. Bring one arm out to the side, palm facing forward (thumb side up), hand at shoulder height. Stabilize through the feet, hips, and torso.

Cues: Inhale and draw the arm several inches back, maintaining the hand at a steady height and keeping the arm straight. Notice the same feeling of the scapula moving towards the midline.

Exhale and draw the arm several inches forward, still maintaining the hand at a steady height and keeping the arm straight. Notice the same feeling of the scapula moving away from the midline.

Continue to alternate between these two, noticing the motion of the scapula.

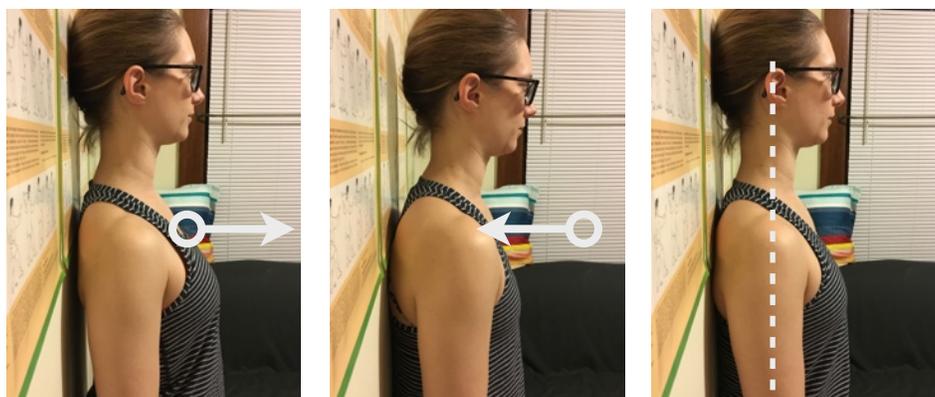
Set up in Trikonasana:

Come into Trikonasana with the top arm reaching towards the ceiling. Find stability through the rest of the body; press the bottom hand into a block to create more buoyancy in the upper arm and torso.

Cues: Like in Tadasana, inhale and draw the arm a few inches behind the body, maintaining the hand at a steady height and keeping the arm straight; notice again the drawing of the scapula towards the midline and try to maintain stability in the spine. Exhale and draw the arm a few inches in front of the body; still maintaining the hand at a steady height and keeping the arm straight. Notice the same feeling of the scapula moving away from the midline.

Continue to alternate between these two, noticing the motion of the scapula, to find a position where the arm reaches directly up towards the ceiling.

2. For the upper torso/spine: spinal flexion/extension



- **Version at the wall** [* derived from an exercise taught by Ellen McKenzie at the Yoga Sangha]:

Set up in Tadasana:

Come to Tadasana with the back to the wall with the heels lined up underneath the hips (within the capacity of the student's anatomy). Keep the feet and hips stable and both (or the latter) pressed firmly into the wall during the exercise.

Inhale and bring the back of the head to the wall as the chest presses forward away from the wall.

Exhale and press the back of the upper chest/shoulders into the wall, allowing the head to come forward away from the wall.

Continue to alternate between these two until both the head and the upper chest can rest against the wall, along with the hips.

- **Version on the mat:**

Set up in Sukhasana or Siddhasana:

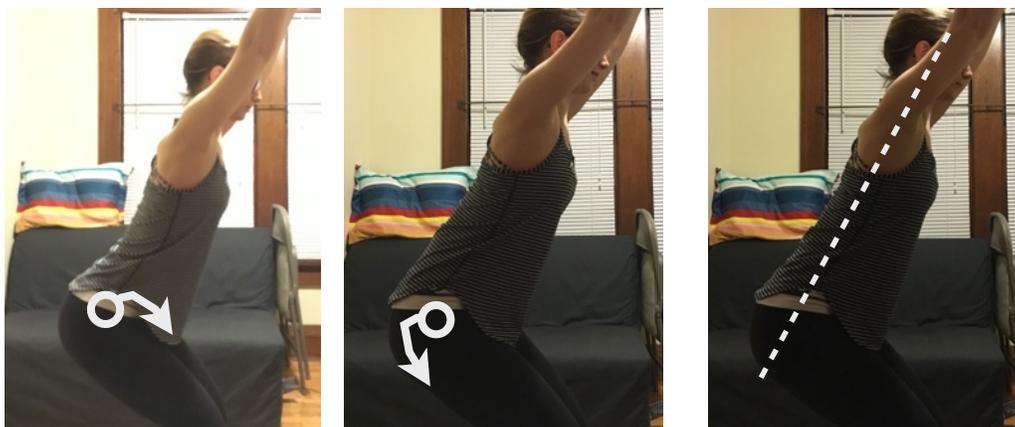
Come to sit in Sukhasana or Siddhasana on height. Keep the legs and hips stable during the exercise.

Cues: Inhale and bring the back of the head backward in space as the chest presses forward away from the back of the mat.

Exhale and press the back of the upper chest/shoulders back in space, allowing the head to come forward.

Continue to alternate between these two until both the head and the upper chest can rest in vertical alignment.

3. For the hips: anterior/posterior tilt



- **Version seated:**

Set up in Sukhasana or Siddhasana:

Come to sit in Sukhasana or Siddhasana with a generous amount of height to help increase mobility of the hips. Keep the legs stable during this exercise and the torso aligned over the hips. Moving through exercise 2 prior to this one is recommended.

Cues: Inhale and increase the anterior tilt of the pelvis. Notice/feel the sits bones move backwards in space.

Exhale and increase the posterior tilt of the pelvis. Notice/feel the sits bones move forwards in space.

Continue to alternate between these two until the sits bones feel as though they are dropping straight down into the earth.

- **Version standing** [* derived from an exercise taught by Ellen McKenzie at the Yoga Sangha]:

Set up in Utkatasana:

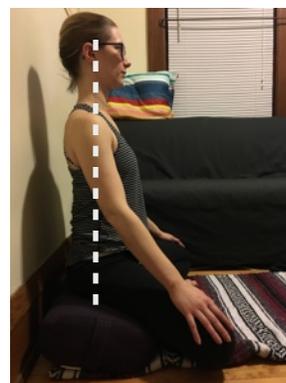
Come into Utkatasana. Draw the low ribs in and extend the arms to lengthen the spine and torso.

Cues: Inhale and increase the anterior tilt of the pelvis. Notice/feel the sits bones move upwards in space.

Exhale and increase the posterior tilt of the pelvis. Notice/feel the sits bones move downwards in space.

Continue to alternate between these two until the sits bones feel as though they are creating an equal pull down and back as the arms are reaching forward and up.

- **Seated version** (for meditation or extended periods of sitting)



Set up in Sukhasana or Siddhasana:

Come to sit in Sukhasana or Siddhasana on height. Moving through exercise 2 and the first exercise 3 seated variation prior to this one is recommended. Stabilize the legs and maintain alignment in the torso during the exercise to allow greater mobility of the hips.

Cues: Inhale and maintain a consistent alignment in the torso and hips as you increase the posterior tilt of the pelvis to deepen the crease in the front hip joint. Allow the spine and head to move forward in space Notice/feel how the weight of the torso and head moves in front of the hips.

Exhale and continue to maintain a consistent alignment in the torso and hips as you increase the posterior tilt of the pelvis. Notice/feel how the weight of the torso and head moves behind the hips.

Continue to alternate between these two positions and progressively decrease the range of motion until the torso and head feel aligned directly over the hips.

4. For the femoral joint: internal/external rotation



All variations of this exercise have the benefit of support from the ground, so no movement to a wall is necessary. For students with greater mobility and strength, however, standing versions of this exercise could be practiced with the leg that is rotating extended forward, to the side, or behind, in ballet *rond de jambe* fashion.

- **Version on the back:**

Set up in Supta Tadasana:

Come to the mat and find a Tadasana posture on the back. Bend one knee and place the foot flat on the mat for greater stability. Gently flex the extended foot. Students with more mobility could extend the bottom leg towards the ceiling in Supta Padangusthasana to experience the exercise differently.

Cues: Inhale and externally rotate the femur of the extended leg, initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point away from the midline.

Exhale and internally rotate the femur of the extended leg, initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point towards the midline.

Continue to alternate between these two until the toes point straight to the ceiling.

- **Version sitting:**

Set up in Upavista Konasana (or Dandasana):

Come to sit on height and come into Upavista Konasana, maybe using the exercises above to find alignment in the torso and hips.

Cues: Inhale and externally rotate the femur of one leg (or both simultaneously), initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point away from the midline.

Exhale and internally rotate the femur of the extended leg, initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point towards the midline.

Continue to alternate between these two until the toes point straight to the ceiling.

- **Version standing:**

Set up in Tadasana:

Come into Tadasana with a few inches of space between the feet. Shift weight slightly into one foot and maintain stability in that leg and the hip joint.

Cues: Inhale and externally rotate the femur of the other leg as the heel pivots on the ground, initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point away from the midline.

Exhale and internally rotate the femur of the extended leg as the heel pivots on the ground, initiating the movement from the hip joint. The toes will point towards the midline.

Continue to alternate between these two until the toes face forward towards the top of the mat.

5. For the jaw and neck, (specifically for savasana)



This mini vini is less about alignment in Savasana, per say, but in my experience it helps to release tension in the neck muscles and allow one to relax into Savasana with less effort required to keep the head in a neutral position.

- **Version with the aid of gravity:**

Set up: stand in a relaxed Tadasana. Allow the eyes to gaze softly towards the midline so that the head is not tilted up or down.

Cues: Inhale and open the jaw straight down as far as it will go in this position (no forward or sideways movement).

Exhale and close the jaw straight up until the teeth gently close.

Continue to alternate between these two positions until you find a neutral jaw position with the lips gently closed.

- **Version on the mat**

Set up in Savasana: Come to a comfortable Savasana position.

Cues: Inhale and open the jaw straight down (towards the feet) as far as it will go in this position (no forward or sideways movement).

Exhale and close the jaw straight up (towards the crown of the head) until the teeth gently close.

Continue to alternate between these two positions until you find a neutral jaw position with the lips gently closed.

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