

**Create Awareness, Health and Balance within the  
Female Pelvic Floor  
with the Transformational Power of Yoga**

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## Introduction

It seems that any issues related to the pelvis, specifically a female's pelvic floor, are considered somewhat of a taboo subject matter (especially here in the West) and are often overlooked, under discussed and for the most part embarrassing to talk about. Sort of a "don't ask", don't tell" attitude. The truth is, the pelvic floor, plays a very vital role of supporting our organs, specifically the pelvic organs and is directly tied to the overall health and well being of our core strength and stability. Most women have imbalance in their pelvic floor muscles and often aren't even aware of it. Seven out of 10 women will suffer from some sort of pelvic floor dysfunction in their lifetime.

This subject affected me personally after I had 3 kids, I felt like everything changed "down there" (and not for the better!). My personal journey of not being afraid of/or in denial of my pelvic floor began when I decided to take Leslie Howard's "Awakening the Female Pelvis-Yoga, Breath and the Pelvic Floor" at Prairie last winter. I attended the workshop with the intention of creating awareness for my own personal use as well as a tool to use as a Yoga teacher. To say the least, my expectations were exceeded and then some. Her workshop, was insightful, informative, fun, funny and really changed my perception of what a woman's pelvic floor is really all about. Leslie's approach to this subject is no nonsense with a touch of grace and humor. Her main message was very simple, "develop a relationship with your pelvis!" It sounds funny, but she had a great point. We stare at our face in the mirror all day long, tend to it, worry about wrinkles etc... But we are terrified to put a mirror down there and see what's going on. I know I was guilty!

I learned so much about the actual physical structure of the pelvic floor which is actually quite complex, made up of 3 layers of muscle and has a lot of responsibility!! It holds our organs in place...I had no idea! She also talked a lot about the emotional connection between our minds and our pelvis that can run very deep. Most importantly she gave such in depth knowledge of how yoga can truly heal and create balance and health within a female's pelvic floor.

As a result of my experience, I was inspired to take the knowledge I gained from Leslie and not only apply to my own health and well being, but share it with other women. I felt like this was a subject matter I could relate to on a personal level and wanted to share it with other women who probably were going through the same struggles as I was. Women of all different ages, backgrounds etc.. can suffer from pelvic floor dysfunction. Bringing this issue to life was one of the most important messages that Leslie conveyed. Talk about it!

Allow ourselves to connect as a community of women. I felt it was my responsibility and privilege to take the knowledge I gained from her workshop, build upon it and share it with other women. We cannot transform until awareness is established. That's really what the underlying theme of this paper is... creating awareness. Awareness creates power, the power to create change.

## **Understanding the Female Pelvic Floor**

### **“Steady Hammock”**

Often, the pelvic floor is referred to as a hammock at the bottom of our torso. This hammock has a lot of responsibility for keeping our pelvic organs supported and in place. The “hammock” attaches from the four corners of the pelvis (both sitting bones, the pubic bone and tailbone). Keeping the hammock image in mind, you can visualize your breath flowing in and out like a breeze allowing the “hammock” to move with breath. The pelvic floor follows the movement of the diaphragm. Expanding on the inhalation, retracting on the exhalation.

To be a little more anatomically specific, the female pelvic floor is made up of 3 layers of muscles( 16 muscles!), ligaments, tendons and connective tissue. It is actually quite complex (refer to photo at end of paper). Maintaining or creating balance (strong yet flexible muscles) in all 3 layers is very important to the overall health of the pelvic floor and can directly affect our postural health as well.

### **Pelvic Floor Dysfunction**

Any time there are imbalances or disorders in the pelvic floor muscles, tendons and or ligaments, it is referred to as pelvic floor dysfunction. There are several reasons how and why a woman’s pelvic floor can become compromised. Childbirth, pregnancy, hysterectomy, menopause, obesity, postural habits emotional stress trauma, stress incontinence, urge incontinence, heredity are some of the most common. More specially, these conditions cause a woman’s pelvic floor to become too weak or lax (Hypotonic) or too tense and tight (hypertonic). Commonly, women can suffer from both hypo and hyper conditions at the same time in different layers of the pelvic floor. Awareness is the first step to determining a woman’s needs for creating health in the pelvic floor.

- Hypotonic- when pelvic floor muscles lack tone, strength and are weak. Common causes, conditions and symptoms associated with hypotonicity ;childbirth, stress incontinence, prolapsed organs, day to day activity (coughing, sneezing etc..)
- Hypertonic- when pelvic floor muscles are tense, gripped but at the same time can also be weak. Common, causes, conditions and symptoms associated with hypertonicity; urge incontinence, urge frequency, irritable bowel syndrome, pelvic pain, vulvadonia

## **How Yoga Can Create a Healthy, Happy Pelvic Floor**

Yoga teaches us to be in touch with all aspects of our being- the body, the mind, the breath and our inner truth. With true awareness, we are in control of ourselves, our thoughts and actions. With respect to using yoga as a healing tool for women's pelvic floor dysfunction, awareness is the first step in that process. Combining awareness with the physical practice of yoga (asana) and Pranayama can create a powerful healing environment. As the true definition of yoga is to yoke or unite, these 3 elements unite to create transformation and healing both physically and emotionally.

### **Awareness**

Awareness is the first step in transformation. If we aren't aware of what's going on in our bodies, how can we transform, heal or change it? In relation to pelvic floor health, many women are simply uninformed, scared or in denial of what is happening to their body. As I mentioned in the introduction, a woman's pelvis seems to carry a negative stigma so we tend to just ignore it, or accept what a Dr tells us and then brush it under the rug.

Once we decide to be fully aware, we can create the power to heal and transform. Yoga can begin to create that awareness of self by just simply breathing. When we connect with with the breath, we connect with the present...when we connect with the present, We have created Awareness!!

### **Asana Practice**

Asana practice brings space to the physical body and allows prana to move and flow. Specific postures can be used to direct breath (oxygen) to the pelvis. Staying connected to the breath during asana practice is important for can calming the the nervous system which will calm the mind and alleviate stress and anxiety. This is especially important for hypertonic women. Yoga postures can encourage the pelvic floor to both engage and release (following the breath) which leads to the ultimate goal of balance. ( I will talk more specifically about breathwork in the pranayama section). Depending upon whether the student has hypo or hyper tendencies, yoga postures can be used accordingly to either focus on engaging and strengthening or releasing and relaxing the pelvic floor muscles. Again, being aware of what you need from your yoga practice is the first step to allow asana to help create health and vitality in the pelvic floor area.

Typically speaking, hypertonic students need to focus on releasing and relaxing. Focusing on the inhalation and allowing the breath to be directed down into the pelvis will create space. Supine pranayama, forward folding, inversions tend to be helpful for creating space and releasing the pelvic floor muscles.

Hypotonic students benefit from engaging the pelvic floor muscles during asana practice. Engaging the pelvic floor muscles (not the sphincter muscles!) pulling them up and in on the exhalation. Back bending, arm balances are helpful for creating tone.

Another aspect of the physical practice is to create a strong core. Since there is a direct correlation between the health of the pelvic floor and our core stability, it is important to use asana to help create strength (and flexibility) in the core. If our core is weak, the pelvis tends to tilt forward which strains/shortens the pelvic floor muscles. Being aware of this connection is very important as we go through our asana practice!

## **Pranayama**

Unless one practices yoga or is consciously aware of their breath, most of us don't breathe deeply enough. Our breathing habits are affected by our postural habits, daily activities, stress, physical and emotional trauma, and many other factors. Pranayama is the most important part of any yoga practice. Yoga really is a breathing practice first and foremost! Directing breath to the pelvis, allows oxygen and blood flow to circulate freely. It is essential for creating overall health in the pelvic floor. The best way to ensure breath is fully reaching the pelvic area is to practice diaphragmatic breathing (belly breathing) in a supine position. Diaphragmatic pranayama follows the rhythm of the diaphragm. On the inhalations, belly expands and breath is directed downward into the pelvic area. This allows the pelvic floor to both release, expand and receive oxygen. On the exhalation, the pelvic floor once again follows the diaphragm and lifts back up. This downward flow of energy (apana) is beneficial for oxygenating, and creating blood flow within the whole pelvic region. Following this breathing pattern is beneficial for both hypotonic and hypertonic pelvic floor conditions. For hypertonicity, it is important to focus on and even extend the inhalation, allowing expansion and release. Hypotonic students should focus on the exhalation which contracts the pelvic floor muscles and pulls them back up and in. This can allow muscles to strengthen and regain tone. Again creating that balance of strong muscles that can also release is optimal.

Having students close their eyes and visualize their pelvic floor as "hammock" is a great way for them to be able build that connection of how the breath moves through the pelvis. Consciously watching their own inhaled and exhaled as the "hammock" moves with the "breeze".

Along with allowing the pelvis to breathe and receive oxygen, pranayama is great for calming the mind and the nervous system. Especially for women who suffer from hypertonicity. Since there is a direct correlation between emotional tension held in the pelvis, calming the mind and the nervous system can have tremendous benefits for releasing tension both physically and emotionally.

## **Mula Bandha... to engage or not to engage?**

Mula Bandha, is the energy "gate" located at the base of the pelvic floor. One important thing that Leslie talked about in her workshop is the fact that engaging Mula is more complex than most people realize. The action of lifting up the perineum as well as the anus (as it lifts and draws back towards sacrum) can be more complex than most students realize. Engaging mula should be practiced with care and only appropriate for more advanced yoga practitioners. If mula is over engaged or engaged improperly, it can lead to worsening a hypertonic condition. On the other hand, if a woman has lack of tone, she can benefit from engaging Mula as long as it is engaged properly and with awareness. What I took from this part of her lecture... Don't teach Mula in a large group setting. The subject needs detailed attention and explanation. Instead, talk about engaging the pelvic floor muscles as a whole.

## **Yoga for Pelvic Floor in Action**

After I took Leslie's workshop, I was asked to create a workshop and teach it to women at Trager Healing Center in Naperville (where I currently teach yoga). I was beyond excited to share the information I learned! Below is the sequence and information I created for a 1.5 hour Pelvic Floor Workshop. I have since taught this particular workshop at Thrive Integrative Wellness Center, Naperville. With guidance from Leslie's workshop and my own experience about what resonates with students, I came up with the following sequence that is appropriate for both hypertonic and hypotonic conditions and really any woman with a pelvis! ;)

Along with asana practice, we also discuss the importance of the pelvic floor from an anatomical perspective and common conditions and symptoms associated with pelvic floor dysfunction. My goal as a teacher for this workshop was to create a safe, fun, insightful learning environment that allows the students to truly understand how the amazing healing power of yoga can play a pivotal role in creating awareness and ultimately transformation for pelvic floor as well as for the mind-body as a whole. If I can simply teach how to create awareness, then I feel I have done my job. Once the student has built that connection with their own pelvic floor, they can then take the conceptual knowledge from the class and begin their own journey of transformation. Hopefully their own personal journey will inspire them to tell others and begin to spread the word of awareness!

# Pelvic Floor Workshop

## Yoga, Breath, and the Pelvic Floor

with Tara Petrusch

### Did you Know?

- 7 out of 10 women will suffer from pelvic floor dysfunction at some point
- 25% will experience some sort of pelvic pain in their lifetime.
- there are 3 layers of muscles that make up the pelvic floor. Each layer has 4 muscles (forming a sort of hammock that supports our organs)
- Often there are imbalances in our pelvic floor muscles i.e.: tight and weak, or loose and weak; We want a healthy pelvic floor which means our muscles are strong and can both engage and release.
- Direct correlation between our posture and the health of our pelvic floor. Often we slump and push our tailbone forward which tightens/strains our pelvic floor muscles. Good posture is key for a healthy pelvis.
- We carry a lot of stress/tension/trauma in our pelvis which carries into our pelvic floor muscles
- Awareness is key!! Don't be afraid to explore yourself or be afraid to talk about your issues "down there". Awareness is the first step to creating a healthy, balanced pelvic floor.

**Hypotonic:** pelvic floor muscles are lax and over stretched i.e.; urinary incontinence (urine leaks when sneezing, jumping etc...) prolapse of organs, vagina/rectal collapse

**Hypertonic:** pelvic floor muscles are tense and stressed i.e.; urge incontinence (try but can't go) pelvic pain due to tight/tense muscles, irritable bowel syndrome, constipation

**\*\*Awareness is the first step to deciding if you are hyper or hypo or a combination of the two. A healthy pelvic floor is when muscles are strong and can both engage and release.**

### How can yoga help:

- Yoga gets you moving, gets oxygen flowing and can simply create space in the body
- Breathwork (Pranayama) moves oxygen and prana throughout our entire body
- Diaphragmatic breathing pattern is optimal for sending breath to the pelvis. With this type of breathing, we keep the breath out of the chest and focus on filling the belly and directing our inhalations downward.



- Reduces stress/anxiety which can help relax our mind, body and help release tight/tense muscles in the pelvic floor.
- Yoga postures (asanas) can strengthen weak pelvic floor muscles and relax tight ones and allow our breath to guide us

### **3 Layers (16 muscles) that make up the pelvic floor "hammock for our organs"**

**Layer 1:** Attaches from tailbone to pubic bone (its thickest part is at the perineum.) Includes sphincter muscles (urethral and anal)

**Layer 2:** Attaches horizontally from sit bone to sit bone (across the perineum). This is area of p.f. that referred to when told to engage "mula bandha"

**Layer 3:** Deepest and largest layer of p.f. muscles. Attaches from pubic bone to sacrum with a lot of connective tissue. The Levator Ani which is the largest p.f. muscle is part of this layer The levator has a right side and a left side. Often, one side is tighter/strained causing an imbalance which can lead to back or pelvic pain

## Sequence

### **Discussion: (15-20 mins)**

- Go through handout, briefly discuss importance of pelvic floor, basic anatomical make up and how yoga can help transform pelvic floor dysfunctions, share personal stories, answer questions

### **Supine Diaphragmatic Pranayama (feed grounded, knees touching-5-7 mins)**

- Begin with awareness of breath- release muscles, observe breath
- cue diaphragmatic breath (hand on belly- follow inhalations moving downward, exhalations moving back up. Chest remains still. Several rounds of diaphragmatic breath

### **Sukasana (10-15 breaths using hammock visualization)**

- Roll to side come to seated position
- Close eyes and imagine your pelvic floor as a hammock hanging from all 4 corners of your pelvis"-both notice sitting bones, the public bone in the front and the tail bone in the back. using your breath... begin to notice your hammock moving with the breath like its moving in the breeze" inhale- expands lengthens, exhale it engages and pulls back up and in. Continue to visualize with own breath pattern

### **Exercises to locate 3 layers of pelvic floor: important for creating awareness of how muscles in different layers work**

- Finding layer 1: Seated position -roll strap to 1" diameter place on perineum . eyes closed, begin to follow breath (notice pf expand on inhale, pull up on exhale. students begin to subtly contract strap on exhalation.Repeat 5-7 times
- Finding layer 2:
  - a) feet on wall hips distance with block heels turned out - following breath, squeeze exhale, press heels away from each other; notice sit bones widen
  - b) feet on wall- thighs strapped., toes pointing in. on exhale press thighs into strap, draw heels together- notice sit bones draw closer together
- Finding Layer 3: supine, feet grounded, knees hips distance;alternate leg lifts with neutral spine- engage low belly- lift on exhale. lift one foot at a time a few inches off the ground. alternate 5 times on each side. Try both feet at same time. If low back lifts go back to alternating. (Repeat this exercise w/ partner and rolled yoga) mat on

### **all 4's notice pelvic floor- observe pelvic floor with breath x101**

- one of best yoga postures to locate and observe pf move with breath
- observe release on inhalation and engagement on exhalation
- hypo-focus on expanding on inhale, hypo- focus contracting on exhale

### cat /cow

- warming up spine, notice breath moving

### Balāsana

- Notice breath in back side of body going all way down to pelvis
- Great way to send oxygen to Sacrum, Great for hypertonic

### Adho Mukha Svanāsana (bent knees) 10 breaths

- Sit bones expand on inhale (great for creating space), subtle contraction on exhale
- Hypotonic students can focus more on engaging exhale

### Plank (5-7 breaths)

- engage core engage and notice long line of energy from crown of head to heels.
- child's pose and repeat with block btwn thighs
- notice difference w/ block- good for hypotonic to increase engagement awareness
- Good for overall core strength

### Balāsana>AMS transition

### Uttanāsana

- Bent knees- notice sit bones wide, creating space, head and neck relax
- Great for hypertonic to just release and breath space into pelvic floor

### Tadasana transition

### Malāsana (15 breaths)

- One of the overall best postures for both releasing and engaging the pelvic floor
- close eyes and follow breath... notice release on inhale, engagement on exhale
- squat on block to notice perineum press onto block and observe inhales/exhales
- This pose has massive benefits for releasing a gripped pelvic floor
- Modification for hypotonic students- press up into standing on the exhale, engaging the pelvic floor muscles to increase tone (squat dynamically 5-10 times focusing on exhale)

### Dandasana (10 breaths)

- Great for posture- sit bones grounded, tall spine, open chest, notice breath

**Navasana ( 5 breaths repeat 2 times)**

- building core strength
- offer different modifications for different levels of students

**Baddha Konasana (10 breaths)**

- Great for releasing inner groin, pelvic floor
- Press heels together on exhale to engage pelvic floor
- For hypertonic students- (Supta)recline on bolster and direct breath to pelvis to create space

**Setu Bandhasana (5-7 breaths)**

- Observe inhalations(release), exhalations (engage)
- For hypo students- place block under sacrum and focus on expanding inhalations

**Supta Prasarita Padangusthasana(wide leg stretch at wall) 10 repetitions**

- inhalation- expand legs wide (to students flexibility level)
- Exhalation- pull in low bell, lift pelvic- draw legs back together leading with heels
- For hypertonic students- keep legs open and take several breaths

**Viparita Karani (2-3 minutes)**

- very beneficial for sending breath to pelvis, great for prolapse and realigning pelvic organs

**Savasana**

**Read Yoga Manifesto at end of practice**

## **Conclusion**

I feel this paper has given me the opportunity to bring this important and often underappreciated subject matter to women of all types. I have to give thanks for the knowledge and inspiration I gained from Leslie's workshop. It changed me and my perception of my own pelvic floor issues and gave me a new intention Dharma for my yoga teachings.

What I realized during this process of exploration and teaching is that most women had no idea what a pivotal role the pelvic floor muscles play in our overall health and well being. The number one response I receive when I ask for feedback or comments at the end of a class is that they gained awareness! Awareness of what the pelvic floor is and how they didn't realize how much yoga could transform and ultimately heal physically and emotionally. I also observed a sense of community with our classes. Being around other women who have similar issues in a supportive, non judgemental environment helped make a sensitive subject matter not so awkward to talk about.

It s an amazing gift to be able to share and spread the beauty of yoga. Yoga and the awareness it creates on such a pure, simple level. That union of allowing the mind and the body to connect by simply breathing can truly transform. Yoga truly always meets you where you are! (always my motto- thank you for those simple but powerful words, Lori Gaspar) Namaste.

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