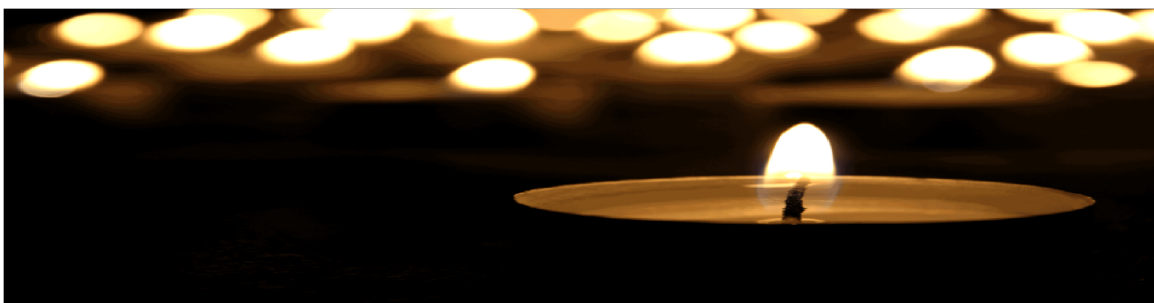


# Yoga for Chronic Pain

with Laura Goethe



## Understanding Pain

As a warning system of the body – pain is our body's way of telling us something is wrong. It's a *symptom* of a threat (injury or illness).

Pain is a very complex process that involves and is shaped by *not only the physical body*, but also ***the thoughts, emotions, stress, and EXPERIENCE – learning from past pain experiences.***

### Acute Pain vs Chronic Pain

Acute pain: an immediate and temporary response to injury or illness that typically lasts from a few hours to a few days.

Chronic Pain: pain lasting more than 6 months, or longer than what is considered to be “normal healing time”.

It can be caused by

- underlying chronic disease
- damage to nerves
- even damage to the pain response system itself

*Chronic pain not only makes us more sensitive to physical pain – it can also make us more sensitive to any kind of physical, emotional, or social stress.*

## **Role of the Fight-or-Flight Response**

This is the part of our nervous system that helps us run away from danger – and pain is perceived as danger!

It's activated when we experience stress of any kind (both good and bad stress).

The Fight-or-Flight response is meant to last only long enough for us for fight or flee.

## **Protective Pain Response**

In an attempt to protect us from future threats, the mind and body have learned to amplify our present pain and suffering.

Every part of the pain system – from threat detectors in the body to neurons in the brain – will adapt in ways that make it easier to detect a similar threat in the future and mount a *Protective Pain Response*.

There are 2 types of these learning experiences that play a key role in chronic pain:

### **1. *Sensitization to pain:***

We're on guard, waiting for the next pain episode, or a

worsening of current pain – and the nervous system is doing the same thing!

## *2. Interpreting all threats as physical pain:*

- Nonharmful physical sensations are misinterpreted as physical pain (a light touch on the hand or the back)
- Stress sensitizes pain receptors throughout the body
- “Negative” emotions like anger and loneliness make the brain more likely to listen to pain signals throughout the body

## **Neuroplasticity**

This is the ability of our nervous system to learn in response to experience – it gets better at doing what it’s asked to do.

Most of the time this is a helpful and wonderful feature of the nervous system (i.e. learning a new skill, avoiding touching a hot stove) however with chronic pain, it actually gets *better at being in pain* by strengthening the ability to prepare a Protective Pain Response.

There is good news here though. Neuroplasticity makes any response we practice more likely – including healing responses such as relaxation, acceptance, and gratitude!

## **The Body, Breath, and Mind Relationship**

### Breath as a barometer-on & OFF THE MAT

- Breath pattern for every emotional state
- Small changes in our breathing can lead to big changes in the functioning of the body and mind, including lowering stress hormones and reducing sensitivity to pain

### When we focus on the breath, it helps still the mind

- We can only focus on one thing at a time, so why not pick something helpful? 😊 The breath is a tangible tool to keep us rooted in the present moment (monumentally important when dealing with chronic pain – whether during a current pain event, stopping the cycle of suffering due to anticipation, catastrophizing, fear of future pain and potential worsening pain at onset)
- Portable and immediate results – can be used anytime, anywhere and can be leveraged to provide immediate relief (from pain, from the unhelpful habits of the mind, as well as lessening our reaction to pain)

## Specific Pranayama techniques

### Simple Breath Awareness

- seated or lying down, rest the right hand on the low belly and the left hand on the heart.
- Breathe normally and notice where you feel the breath move.
- Make no effort to change or control the breath, just notice the movement, length, depth, pace, etc.
- After a few breaths, without any struggle or effort, begin to lengthen and deepen the breath.
- With each inhalation, fill the entire torso, from the lower belly to the collarbones, and
- With each exhalation, begin to soften and relax, releasing any tension, gripping, or holding.

*We can also use the exhalation to visualize the pain leaving the body – breathing it out.*

### Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana)

- Inhale right, exhale left. Then, inhale left, exhale right. This is one round. *Always begin with the inhalation on the right and end with the exhalation on the right.* Complete 10 rounds (20 breaths).
- This can also be done as a visualization practice- simply imagine that you are inhaling through the right

nostril, exhaling left, then inhaling left and exhaling right.

This is a balancing breath – literally translated as *energy cleansing* – and research has shown that it can wash away the effects of stress and lower blood pressure and heart rate!

### Counted Breath

- Simply count the length of the inhalations and the length of the exhalations.
- Begin to extend the length of the exhalation (I have found it a little easier to add 2 to the exhale, practice that for a while, and then add another 2).

The idea is to extend the exhalation so it's twice the length of the inhalation (i.e. inhale 4, exhale 8).

Fantastic for dealing with a current pain event and the insomnia that so often accompanies chronic pain.

## Specific Meditation techniques

Bhavana

Chitta (moving the mind)

- chose a specific state of mind/healing state, such as gratitude, appreciation, joy, or love.
- *Emotions we choose to feel have the same effect on the body-mind as they do when they spontaneously arise.*

Pratipaksha (opposite thought) – A good temporary distraction to help end the vicious cycle of mind.

- The more we practice this, the easier it becomes to shift thoughts from pain and negative thoughts to more helpful states of mind, and thus interrupting the stress response that accompanies them.

Metta (loving kindness) – including befriending the body.

*As pain patients, we often feel betrayed by our bodies.*

- Start by becoming aware of yourself, and focus on feelings of peace, calm, and tranquility.
- Then, allow these to grow into feelings of strength and confidence, and finally, to develop into love within your heart.



- You can use an image, like a warm, golden light flooding your body, or a phrase such as ‘may I be well and happy’, which you can repeat silently to yourself

Mantra Meditation – So Hum (I am That) or any mantra that focuses attention.

- Any mantra works – even something as simple as peace, love, relaxation, etc.

## **Asana for Chronic Pain**

- Honor your body-always listen to what your body is saying and respond accordingly. Know when to move and when to be still (active v restorative)
- At times, it seems that last thing in the world we want to do when our pain is flaring up is get up or move around. However, sitting, laying, and not moving around tends to make pain worse. Even if it’s simply walking a few steps or stretching the arms over head taking a few deep breaths, do that! 😊
- Specific poses for chronic pain will vary greatly depending on the specific chronic pain condition, as well as modifications (blankets, blocks, straps, chairs, walls, etc.)

- Asana literally means posture-it can be any form, whether a yoga pose or not. Taking a shower, floating in the pool, even washing the hands can be a “form”. Whatever form is chosen, move mindfully, paying attention to the sensations arising from moment to moment, feel the breath moving slowly and steadily. *When the breath changes, the mind will follow, so think steady and joyful.*

## **Practicing at Home**

One of the most wonderful aspects of yoga for chronic pain is the portability of most of the practices. We are better off picking 1 practice to stick with every day, regardless of circumstance, and then adding others as we are able.

*Have a back-up plan or choose your main practice based on how the body feels most often.*

If we are in pain more often than not, it may be better to start with a breathing or meditation practice than anything too active.

According to the Yoga Sutras (1.14) Practice becomes firmly grounded when well attended to for a long time, without break, and in all earnestness.

It simply works best when we actually do it – even if it's 5 minutes of conscious breathing. 😊

- Pick a place free from distraction – use a Do Not Disturb sign and close the bedroom door!
- Do your best to practice at the same time each day and/or night. Practice makes permanent and we are forming new, more helpful habits.
- Plan on at least 5-10 minutes (longer if at all possible). Self-care is incredibly important and a necessary part of the healing process.
- When having a pain flare-up, it may be necessary to adjust your main practice. Rather than abandoning your practice entirely, simply select a different tool or technique and spend at least 5 minutes caring for yourself.

## **Books I Recommend**

Yoga for Pain Relief, Kelly McGonigal

The Mindfulness Solution to Pain, Dr. Jackie Gardner-Nix

Yoga as Medicine, Timothy McCall

Relax and Renew, Judith Lasater

Back Care Basics, Mary Pullig Schatz, MD

Yoga, The Path to Holistic Health, B.K.S. Iyengar

Cool Yoga Tricks, Miriam Austin

Yoga and Breast Cancer, Kollak/Utz-Billing



# Daily Practice Journal

Today I'm feeling...

---

---

---

My main practice for today will be...

---

If I am feeling up for it, I'll add the following practice...

---

This is my back-up plan...

---

## Breathwork

Simple Breath Awareness  
Alternate Nostril  
Counted Breath  
Something else

## Meditation

Chitta Bhavana  
Pratipaksha Bhavana  
Metta Bhavana  
Mantra  
Something else

## Movement

Restorative Yoga  
Gentle stretching  
Taking a walk  
Shower or bath  
Play with the dog  
Something else



Please

Do Not

Disturb