

# Yoga Articles by Shiva Rea

## For Beginners: Anjali Mudra

By Shiva Rea

*Anjali* means "offering," and in India this *mudra* is often accompanied by the word "namaste."

If you have attended even one yoga class, it is a familiar gesture: the drawing together of one's palms at the heart. Your teacher may bring his or her hands together while saying "Namaste" at the beginning or end of a class. You may find his gesture within certain asanas—in *Tadasana* (Mountain Pose), before you begin Sun Salutations, or in balance poses such as *Vrksasana* (Tree Pose).

This sacred hand position, called *anjali mudra* (AHN-jah-lee MOO-dra), is found throughout Asia and has become synonymous with our images of the East, from the smiling face of the Dalai Lama peering over his fingertips to images of devotees before a Hindu or Buddhist altar.

In the West, we translate this gesture as a posture of prayer. Because we have grown up with this gesture as part of our culture, each of us probably has our own personal connection to this *mudra*—positive or negative. Some of us may find a subconscious resistance to bringing our hands together as if it were a sign of submission. However, the beauty of this gesture, which positions us right at the core of our being, is timeless and universal.

I know a 3-year-old who is delighted to greet people this way and an actor who prepares himself with this gesture before entering the stage. As we explore the significance and potential of this *mudra*, be open to your own experience and ways that this simple yet powerful hand position can be a practical tool in your practice and daily life. In Sanskrit, *mudra* means "seal" or "sign" and refers not only to sacred hand gestures but also whole body positions that elicit a certain inner state or symbolize a particular meaning.

*Anjali mudra* is but one of thousands of types of *mudras* that are used in Hindu rituals, classical dance, and yoga. *Anjali* itself means "offering," and in India this *mudra* is often accompanied by the word "namaste" (or "namaskar," depending on one's dialect). As the consummate Indian greeting, like a sacred hello, *namaste* is often translated as "I bow to the divinity within you from the divinity within me." This salutation is at the essence of the yogic practice of seeing the Divine within all of creation. Hence, this gesture is offered equally to temple deities, teachers, family,

friends, strangers, and before sacred rivers and trees. *Anjali mudra* is used as a posture of composure, of returning to one's heart, whether you are greeting someone or saying goodbye, initiating or completing an action.

As you bring your hands together at your center, you are literally connecting the right and left hemispheres of your brain. This is the yogic process of unification, the yoking of our active and receptive natures. In the yogic view of the body, the energetic or spiritual heart is visualized as a lotus at the center of the chest. *Anjali mudra* nourishes this lotus heart with awareness, gently encouraging it to open as water and light do a flower.

Begin by coming into a comfortable sitting position like *Sukhasana* (Easy Pose). Lengthen your spine out of your pelvis and extend the back of your neck by dropping your chin slightly in. Now, with open palms, slowly draw your hands together at the center of your chest as if to gather all of your resources into your heart. Repeat that movement several times, contemplating your own metaphors for bringing the right and left side of yourself—masculine and feminine, logic and intuition, strength and tenderness—into wholeness.

Now, to reveal how potent the placement of your hands at your heart can be, try shifting your hands to one side or the other of your midline and pause there for a moment. Don't you feel slightly off kilter? Now shift back to center and notice how satisfying the center line is, like a magnet pulling you into your core. Gently touch your thumbs into your sternum (the bony plate at the center of the rib cage) as if you were ringing the bell to open the door to your heart. Broaden your shoulder blades to spread your chest open from the inside. Feel space under your armpits as you bring your elbows into alignment with your wrists. Stay here for some time and take in your experience. What initial shifts of consciousness do you experience? Is there a change in your mood?

Now imagine that you are beginning your yoga practice—or any activity in which you want to be centered and conscious of how your inner state will affect the outcome of your experience. Take *anjali mudra* again, but this time slightly part your palms as if to make a cup, so that your hands resemble the bud of a lotus flower. Depending on your spiritual orientation, you can metaphorically plant a seed prayer, affirmation, or quality such as "peace," "clarity," or "vitality" within your *anjali mudra*. Drop your chin towards your chest and awaken a sense of humility and awe with which to begin your practice, as if waiting to receive a blessing of good things to come. It is important that this *anjali* or offering be true to your Self as that will be the most effective and uplifting for you. Traditionally, yogis might visualize their *ishta devata* or personal connection to God within the shrine of their hands. For some people this may be a sacred mountain, for others, Jesus, Krishna, or the Mother Goddess. Align your mind (awareness), feeling (heart), and actions (body) within this gesture. When you feel your invocation is complete, draw your fingertips to the center of your forehead, *ajna chakra*, and pause there feeling the calming effect of your touch. Bring your hands back to your center to ground your intention within your heart.

From here you can begin your yoga asanas, meditation, or any activity from a place of connectedness. Notice how much easier it is to be present and joyous with whatever you are doing. Look for other times to integrate *anjali mudra* into your practice and life. Besides the beginning and end of your yoga sessions, *anjali mudra* can be used within the Sun Salutations and many other asanas as a way to come back to and maintain your center. When your hands come

together overhead in *Virabhadrasana I* (Warrior I) or in Tree Pose, this is still *anjali mudra*. Consciously connecting this upward movement of your hands through an invisible line of energy to your heart will help your posture and your inner attitude.

In daily life, this prayerful gesture can be used as a way of bridging inner and outer experience, when saying grace before meals, communicating our truth within a relationship, or as a means of cooling the fires of stress when feeling rushed or reactionary. *Anjali mudra* is an age-old means of helping human beings to remember the gift of life and to use it wisely.

## Consciousness in Motion

By Shiva Rea

*Vinyasa yoga teaches us to cultivate an awareness that links each action to the next—on the mat and in our lives.*

Sit back and relax. Take in these images and see if you can sense the underlying pattern: the flow of the seasons, the rise and fall of the tides in response to the moon, a baby fern unfurling, a Ravi Shankar sitar raga or Ravel's "Bolero," the creation and the dissolution of a Tibetan sand mandala, the flow of *Suryanamaskar* (Sun Salutation).

What do these diverse phenomena have in common? They are all *vinyasas*, progressive sequences that unfold with an inherent harmony and intelligence. "Vinyasa" is derived from the Sanskrit term *nyasa*, which means "to place," and the prefix *vi*, "in a special way"—as in the arrangement of notes in a raga, the steps along a path to the top of a mountain, or the linking of one asana to the next. In the yoga world the most common understanding of *vinyasa* is as a flowing sequence of specific asanas coordinated with the movements of the breath. The six series of Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga are by far the best known and most influential.

Jois's own teacher, the great South Indian master Krishnamacharya, championed the *vinyasa* approach as central to the transformative process of yoga. But Krishnamacharya had a broader vision of the meaning of *vinyasa* than most Western students realize. He not



only taught specific asana sequences like those of Jois's system, but he also saw *vinyasa* as a method that could be applied to all the aspects of yoga. In Krishnamacharya's teachings, the *vinyasa* method included assessing the needs of the individual student (or group) and then building a complementary, step-by-step practice to meet those needs. Beyond this, Krishnamacharya also emphasized *vinyasa* as an artful approach to living, a way of applying the skill and awareness of yoga to all the rhythms and sequences of life, including self-care, relationships, work, and personal evolution.

Desikachar, Krishnamacharya's son, an author and renowned teacher in his own right, has written, "Vinyasa is, I believe, one of the richest concepts to emerge from yoga for the successful conduct of our actions and relationships." In his book *Health, Healing, and Beyond* (Aperture, 1998), he gives a subtle yet powerful example of how his father attended to the *vinyasa* of teaching yoga. Krishnamacharya, to the amazement of his private students, would always greet them at the gate of his center, guide them through their practice, and then honor the completion of their time together by escorting them back to the gate.

The way he honored every phase of their session—initiating the work, sustaining it and then building to a peak, and completing and integrating it—illustrates two of the primary teachings of the *vinyasa* method: Each of these phases has its own lessons to impart, and each relies on the work of the previous phase. Just as we can't frame a house without a proper foundation, we can't build a good yoga practice unless we pay attention to how we begin. And just as a house is flawed if the workmen don't finish the roof properly, we have to bring our actions to completion in order to receive yoga's full benefits. *Vinyasa* yoga requires that we cultivate an awareness that links each action to the next—one breath at a time.

### **Initiating a Course of Action**

Applying *vinyasa* in your yoga practice and daily life has many parallels not just to building a house but also sailing a boat. Like sailing, moving through life demands a synchronization with natural forces that requires skill and intuition, the ability to set a course yet change with the wind and currents. If you want to sail, you have to know how to assess the conditions of the weather—blustery, calm, choppy—which constantly fluctuate, as do our physical, emotional, and spiritual states.

The teachings of yoga include a view called *parinamavada*, the idea that constant change is an inherent part of life. Therefore, to proceed skillfully with any action, we must first assess

where we are starting from today; we cannot assume we are quite the same person we were yesterday. We are all prone to ignoring the changing conditions of our body-mind; we often distort the reality of who we are based on who we think that we should be. This can show up on the yoga mat in any number of inappropriate choices: engaging in a heating, rigorous practice when we're agitated or fatigued; doing a restorative practice when we're stagnant; going to an advanced yoga class when a beginning class better suits our experience and skills. In order to avoid such unbeneficial actions, we need to start out with an accurate assessment of our current state.

So what are the observations a good yogic sailor should make before initiating a *vinyasa*? Like checking out the boat, wind, and waves before you sail, an initial survey of your being can become an instinctive ritual. Ask yourself: What is my energy level? Am I raring to go? Holding any tension? Am I experiencing any little physical twinges or injury flare-ups? Do I feel balanced and ready to sail into my practice? How is my internal state? Am I calm, agitated, focused, scattered, emotionally vulnerable, mentally overloaded, clear and open?

These questions are relevant to how we begin any action, not just our asana practice. In choosing what foods we eat, when we sleep, our conversations and our actions with others—everything that we do—we must understand where we are coming from and choose actions that address any imbalances.

In teaching my students about *vinyasa*, I offer them ways of checking in with their current state at the start of their session. I also will suggest specific strategies for addressing impediments that may break up the flow of their practice. For example, on the bodily level students can choose a more calming practice or one that provides them with a more invigorating opening. If they have a twinge in the lower back, they might want to modify certain postures, perhaps substituting *Bhujangasana* (Cobra Pose) for *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana* (Upward-Facing Dog Pose). If they're suffering from typical urban tensions in the neck and shoulders, they can use a small series of stretches—a mini-*vinyasa*, you might say—to encourage softening and release. On a more internal level, agitated students can focus on releasing tension by relaxing the face and breath; if their energy is more lethargic and diffused, they can focus on their *drishti*, or gaze, to increase their concentration.

The same insight that we use on the yoga mat can be applied to the way that we initiate actions elsewhere in our lives. Are you feeling anxious on your way to a big appointment? Drive more slowly and listen to some calming music to ensure that this imbalance doesn't carry over into your meeting. Such adjustments do not show an unwillingness to accept what is or a compulsive attempt to fix everything until it is just right. Rather, they are

evidence of a deep awareness of and appropriate response to reality. A yogic sailor embraces the changing winds and current and the challenge of setting course in harmony with the ebb and flow of nature.

## Sustaining Power

Once you've properly assessed conditions and initiated action, you can focus on the next phase of *vinyasa*: building up your power, your capacity for a given action. Power is the sailor's ability to tack with the wind, a musician's ability to sustain the rise and fall of a melody, a yogi's deepening capability for absorption in meditation.

The *vinyasa* method has many teachings to offer about how to build and sustain our capacity for action, both on and off the mat. One of the primary teachings is to align and initiate action from our breath—our life force—as a way of opening to the natural flow and power of *prana*, the energy that sustains us all on a cellular level. Thus in a *vinyasa* yoga practice, expansive actions are initiated with the inhalation, contractive actions with the exhalation.

Take a few minutes to explore how this feels: As you inhale, lift your arms up over your head (expansion); as you exhale, lower your arms (contraction). Now try this: Start lifting your arms as you exhale, and inhale as you lower your arms. Chances are that the first method felt intuitively right and natural, while the second felt counterintuitive and subtly "off."

This intuitive feeling of being "off" is an inborn signal that helps us learn how to sustain an action by harmonizing with the flow of nature. Just as a sagging sail tells a sailor to tack and realign with the energy of the wind, a drop in our mental or physical energy within an action is a sign we need to realign our course. In an asana, when the muscular effort of a pose is creating tension, it's often a signal that we are not relying on the support of our breath. When we learn how to sustain the power and momentum of the breath, the result is like the feeling of sailing in the wind—effortless effort.

To build real change in a student's capacity for action, Krishnamacharya utilized a method which he entitled *vinyasa krama* ("*krama*" means "stages"). This step-by-step process involves the knowledge of how one builds, in gradual stages, toward a "peak" within a practice session. This progression can include elements like using asanas of ever-increasing complexity and challenge or gradually building one's breath capacity.

Vinyasa krama is also the art of knowing when you have integrated the work of a certain stage of practice and are ready to move on. I frequently see students ignore the importance of this step-by-step integration. On the one hand, some students will tend to jump ahead to more challenging poses like *Pincha Mayurasana* (Forearm Balance) before developing the necessary strength and flexibility in less-demanding postures like *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward-Facing Dog), *Sirsasana* (Headstand), *Adho Mukha Vrksasana* (Handstand), and other, easier arm balances. The result: They struggle to hold themselves up, becoming frustrated and possibly injured. These Type-A students should remember that strain is always a sign that integration of the previous *krama* has not yet occurred.

On the other hand, some students may congeal around the comfort of a beginning stage and become stagnant; they often become totally energized when given encouragement to open to a new stage which they had written off as beyond their abilities.

### The Art of Completion

All of us are better at some part of the *vinyasa* cycle than others. I love to initiate action and catalyze change but have to consciously cultivate the completion phase. As Desikachar explains it, "It is not enough to climb a tree; we must be able to get down too. In asana practice and elsewhere in life, this often requires that we know how to follow and balance one action with another. In the *vinyasa* method this is known as *pratikriyasana*, "compensation," or literally counterpose—the art of complementing and completing an action to create integration. Can you imagine doing asanas without a Savasana (Corpse Pose) to end your practice? In *vinyasa*, how we complete an action and then make the transition into the next is very important in determining whether we will receive the action's entire benefit. These days I invite my students to complete classes by invoking the quality of yoga into the very next movements of their lives—how they walk, drive, and speak to people once they leave the studio.

### Pathways of Transformation

It is important to remember a *vinyasa* is not just any sequence of actions: It is one that awakens and sustains consciousness. In this way *vinyasa* connects with the meditative practice of *nyasa* within the Tantric Yoga traditions. In *nyasa* practice, which is designed to awaken our inherent divine energy, practitioners bring awareness to different parts of the body and then, through mantra and visualization, awaken the inner pathways for *shakti* (divine force) to flow through the entire field of their being. As we bring the techniques of

*vinyasa* to bear throughout our lives, we open similar pathways of transformation, inner and outer-step by step and breath by breath.