

Classical Vinyasa Krama

In classical *Vinyasa Krama*, the pose's movement is done in concert with the breath. This association can be simple, or elaborate, with the use of breath retention, *bandhas* (locks), and visualization.

Movements are often done from and return to a classical pose or position. At times, two to four poses are linked or "looped" together. Also longer sequences or posture chains are performed. There are several classical sequences such as *Surya Namaskara*.

Sequencing itself becomes a major focus of *vinyasa krama* as the sequence can fulfill one or more purposes of the practice session. Traditionally, *vinyasa krama* refers to practicing in the most effective way for the individual and their circumstances. *Krama* mean "steps" or sequence, *vi* means "in a special way" and also "of the individual", while *nyasa* means "to place," as in placing items in a ritual fashion in just the right way. So *vinyasa* refers, not only to moving poses coordinated with the breath, but in a larger sense to adhering to a well-structured sensible progression of practices so one can progress step by step.

Preliminaries for Classical Vinyasa Krama Practice

1. The Four Phases of the Breath

In even diaphragmatic breathing we have inhalation (*puraka*) and exhalation (*rechaka*.) However we can hold the breath in after inhaling, and hold the breath out after exhaling. Breath retention is in general is called *kumbhaka*. Therefore the four phases of the breath are:

- a. Inhalation – *puraka* (also *abhyantara vritti* = complete inhalation)
- b. Retention after inhalation - *antar kumbhaka* (also *stambha vritti*)
- c. Exhalation – *rechaka* (also called *bahya vritti* = complete exhalation)
- d. Holding the breath out after exhalation - *bahya kumbhaka*

2. Ujjayi Breathing

Ujjayi breathing is when the glottis is closed slightly making an ocean-like sound as the air passes through the throat. This sound gives the practitioner audible feedback as to the quality of the breath, and supports calm internal focus.

3. The *Bandhas* (Locks)

The three main *bandhas*,

- a. *mula bandha* (root lock)
- b. *uddiyana bandha* (stomach lift)
- c. *jaladhara bandha* (chin lock)

are used in *vinyasa krama*. In certain poses, due to the body's position, some or all of these locks may not be possible. In the advanced practice of *vinyasa krama* the *bandhas* are employed with *kumbhaka* (breath retention.)

4. Visualization of *Agni*

In traditional practice, the image of a flame (*agni*) at the navel region is envisioned to support the process of conflagration engendered by this method of practice. As one inhales, the flame is envisioned flooding downward into the pelvic region. This is said to support the burning of waste

and toxins. As one exhales the flame is visualized returning to an upward flow. This is said to support the expulsion of the waste.

Some Common Classical Vinyasa Krama Practices

These practices are using one pose as a ‘center piece’ for related movements, build up getting into the final position, ‘loop’ between two poses, or move along a sequences (that may have variations implicit,) of poses.

1. Standing Staff Pose *Samasthiti Dandasana*

Arm Sequence

2. Chair Standing Staff Forward Fold *Utkatasana-Samasthiti-Uttanasana*

Staff Alternating into Forward Bending Sequence and Chair Sequence

3. Warrior Standing Scale *Virabhadrasana-Tolasana*

Movements in Warrior Pose with final balance into Standing Scale

4. Sun Salutation *Surya Namaskara*

Each position can be a point of departure for movements ; also small loops can be added

5. Triangle Pose – Revolved Triangle Pose *Trikonasana-Parivritta Trikonasana*

Alternating side to side; Also getting into an out of asana; And with head and arm movements

6. Tree Pose *Vrikshasana*

Arms up and down, foot off floor and down: Also Tree to Downward Facing Tree Pose (*Adho Mukha Vrikshasana*)

7. Posterior Stretch Pose – Seated Staff Pose – Up Table Pose *Paschimottanasana-Dandasana-Catuspadapitham*

Can use Upward Facing Plank Pose *Purvottanasana* instead or as variation

8. Downward Facing Boat Pose *Adho Mukha Navasana*

Lifting each limb, half the body split side to side, half the body split bottom and top, and opposite arm and leg

9. Upward Facing Boat Pose *Urdhva Mukha Navasana*

Lifting just upper, just lower, both; Also rolling yoga “sit up”

10. Seated Spread Leg – Side Spread Leg – Uplifted Spread leg Pose *Upavistha Konasana-Parshva Upavistha Konasana- Upavistha Konasana Pratikriya*

Movements done between these any combination of these poses; Can add twists as well (*Parivritta Upavistha Konasana*)

12. Reclined Half Moon – Lifted Half Moon – Extended Lifted Half Moon

Supta Ardha Chandrasana - Ardha Chandrasana Pratikriya-Utthita Ardha Chandrasana Pratikriya

Moving into and out of these three variations of level; Can add *Bharadvajasana*

13. Cobra – Locust-Bow *Bhujangasana – Salambhasana –Dhanurasana* **These are included**

here to show the value and interest of simply using breath coordination and support in going into and out of poses, especially more challenging poses with cautious populations!

14. Desk Pose *Dvipada Pitham*

Going up into pose and arm movements as well as leg lifts in pose

15. Back Lying Pose *Suptasana*

AND *Utthita Ekapadasana –Utthita Dvipadasana-Supta Parshva Padagusthasana*

Variations and combinations of limb lifts with legs splitting, together, or one at a time, or out to sides

16. Shoulder Stand and Headstand *Sarvangasana* and *Shirshasana*

Repeat movements of getting into and out of each one,; also leg movements

17. *Sanmukhi Mudra* for *samyana*

-This is not a vinyasa but is used afterwards to withdrawal attention and increase *samyana*.

(*samyana* = mental concentration)

18 If meditation is not next, then relaxation in Corpse Pose *Shavasana* or in Crocodile Pose *Makarasana* with head turned to the side.

The Logic of Vinyasa Krama

Asana and vinyasa practices are forms done in space. Some are static and some are movement, both are forms. These forms are a systematic orientation to the human body's organization of structural range. Our bodies change from the moment of birth to that of death. In fact, our mind or mental instrument and our energetic capacity changes all along the way as well. Yoga practice must meet our physical, energetic, and mental/emotional needs at every stage of our life if it is to be of value.

The Power of the Pose

Each yoga pose effects every level of our being in very specific ways. The experience of performing a pose gives the effect. I would like to suggest that in addition to thinking of the poses as forms the body enacts in space, we also define them as the concise state of being brought forth by these specific "formal" relationships throughout our body, breath, and mind. In this case, the feeling state engendered by the pose is of equal or greater importance than the articulate achievement of the formal nuances of the posture.

"Form Follows Function"

Classical vinyasa practice is concerned with how the postures function to create a desired effect. And the effect is not in isolation but in relation to the preceding and antecedent postures. This is why sequencing is of such great emphasis. Vinyasa practice could be thought of as the art of movement sequencing for a desired effect. The effect of a pose could as well be different at different times of day, at different points in one's life, and in different people's bodies. Pregnancy is a good example as each person's body performs quite uniquely when carrying a baby, and also each baby will affect a mother differently. Some women insist on continuing to do headstand and shoulder stand in pregnancy. But with the body in such a dramatically different situation, the effect of the posture is considerably different as well.

Adapting Practice

Because function is here valued over form, the postures' formal qualities can be adapted to meet the needs and restrictions of the individual. As A.G. Mohan writes,

All asanas have a name, form, and characteristics. For example, *paschimottasana* (seated forward bend) is the name of a posture, which has a particular form, and whose function is to stretch the back. The characteristics describe this function, and are therefore its most important aspect. So, you adapt the form for the individual, in order to preserve this intended function at a given point in his or her practice. –p. 36, *Yoga for Body, Breath, and Mind*

Steps to a Goal

Vinyasa krama is a way of practicing that yields great progress based on systematic step-by-step attentive development along a path of purpose. Three main organizing principles for purposeful sequencing in classical vinyasa practice are:

1. Pose-counter Pose (*pratikriya*)
2. Centerpiece
3. Pinnacle Pose

Designing Vinyasa

In creating (in common American use) ‘vinyasa’, or breath coordinated posture-based movements, virtually *any* posture can be moved. Typically, one can move a limb or any number of limbs with the core stationary, the core with the limbs stationary, or myriad combinations of torso and limb movements, series and sequences.

Categories of Vinyasa

There are four categories or types of *vinyasa*. They are:

Moving “Centerpiece” Postures. Movements that are done with certain parts of the body while holding a posture, or movements that take the body from a starting position into and out of a pose, or out of an established pose and back into it. The posture you are working off of is called “the centerpiece pose”, the movements take you gradually or straight away into and out of the pose, and can also offer variations on the pose itself. (Ex. C-V-C-V-C)

Posture Loops. Posture loops are short phrases of action that cycle through two to five poses returning to the beginning pose. (Ex. 1-2-3-4-1)

Posture Retrogrades. Many short vinyasa sequences involve moving from one pose to another pose, the back through the middle pose to the first pose. (Ex. 1-2-3-2-1)

Posture Sequences. Posture sequences come in great variety and usually involve five or more poses. Some are long retrogrades like *Surya Namaskara*. Some develop like a long sentence, never repeating any word. Sequences may have a specific purpose such as providing a continual series for a pose-counter pose effect, or preparing the body for a pinnacle pose of greater difficulty. Longer sequences often mix and match many various movement pathways.

Pathways

When the pathways in space created by these movements are simple they are easier for students to follow and remember. However skilled movers such as dancers, gymnasts, and martial artists will easily master more complex pathways. Also broken down in sections, longer more complex vinyasas patterns and long sequences can be learned and then, over time put together.

There are two basic pathways movement can take: **curved or straight**. With this in mind these simple pathways through space become movement traveling:

- a. on a straight pathway back and forth or is PENDULAR
- b. on a straight pathway point to point. Ex. ZIG-ZAG, or a triangular path
- c. on a curved pathway making an ARC
- d. to the point of conclusion of an arc, a CIRCLE
- e. in two opposing curves creating as “S” CURVE (sine wave)
- f. in two opposing curves to the point of conclusion, a FIGURE EIGHT
- g. in combinations of the above, COMPLEX SEQUENCE
- h. in no particular pattern, or RANDOM

Take one posture and explore movements that occur on a straight pathway. This may involve the end of a body part moving in the path (arc-like with distal initiation on a straight path) or flexion and extension through that part (spoke-like.) Then improvise to explore more complex and random combinations of pathways. Of course, the movements themselves are not the entire story of vinyasa practice, breath coordination, and the possible inclusion of *bandhas* and *dristis* can complete the spatial forms. *Vinyasas* can be designed with a purpose in mind, to heat, to cool, to master a pose, to tackle a body problem, to reduce stress, etc. The possibilities are endless!

Classical Arm Positions

In asana and vinyasa krama practice a variety of arm positions are used to produce different effects in postures and in movements. You may have seen many poses using a standard arm position for that pose, such as the hands clasped, palms facing overhead in Warrior Pose, or the arms stretched out to the sides at shoulder height in Triangle Pose. Virtually **any** arm position that is not limited by the actual performance of the posture itself can bring interest and variety to the pose's performance. Arm positions that are shoulder height or higher, and bound positions direct breath more fully into the lungs and utilize various portions of the lungs.

Using open, wide and un-bound arm positions in front of, to the sides, on the hips, shoulder height or lower can make a posture easier or "do-able," especially for individuals with shoulder problems, older adults, and sufferers of back and neck pain.

Clasping (binding) the hands and working with the hands behind the back will increase the difficulty of the pose, and if a standing pose will add more challenge to balancing.

Arm Positions

At sides

Hands on hips

Hands on shoulders

Outstretched in front at shoulder height

Outstretched at sides at shoulder height

Outstretched overhead

Outstretched in back at or near shoulder height

Holding opposite elbow in front at shoulder height

Holding opposite elbow overhead

Holding opposite elbow in back

Holding opposite elbow lifted in back

Palm Positions

Palms facing the midline (one another)

Palms facing laterally (outward)

Palms facing posteriorly (to the back)

Palms facing anteriorly (to the front)

Palms touching – *namaste* position

Palms touching same sides of upper back (elbows up)

Palms touching opposite sides of upper back (elbows up)

Fists

Hand Clasps

Palms touching one another

Fingers clasped with wrists apart at right angles

Fingers clasped with palms facing out

One arm up, one arm down

Forearms crossed and hands crossed back to clasp