

“ Yoga is a holistic practice – it recognises the need for the mind, body and spirit to coexist in harmony with one another in order to restore equilibrium at all levels of existence. ”

# YOGA

## INNER SPRING CLEAN

As we prepare for spring and summer, why not give yourself an internal spring clean to kickstart your mind and body and boost you through to the end of the year, suggests **Emma Palmer**.

**W**ithin the body, there are a number of interconnected systems and organs ensuring consistent and effective elimination of wastes and toxins every single day, and yoga practices are an excellent way to support this natural process.

### **The yoga of cleanliness and purity – *sauca***

From a yoga perspective, the first of the *niyamas* of Patanjali's eightfold path is the practice of *sauca*, meaning cleanliness or purity of the body and mind, both internally and externally. It includes the notion of cleanliness not only on a cellular level but also of thought, word and action

with the idea of freeing the mind and body from any perceived limitations. Yogis believed that yogic purifying practices also led to the more subtle layers being purified, as do other spiritual traditions by implying that 'cleanliness is next to godliness'.

### **Two types of toxins**

On a daily basis we are naturally exposed to two different types of toxins, exogenous and endogenous. An exogenous toxin has its origins outside of the body, such as environmental toxins, including volatile organic compounds found in cosmetics and cleaning products, and some pharmaceutical drugs or chemicals found in our food,

such as MSG or aspartame. Endogenous toxins originate within the body and are responsible for the elimination of natural metabolic waste products from digestion, urea, lactic acid and carbon dioxide.

The body aims to cope with these toxins through organs, including the bladder, kidneys, skin, lungs, large intestine and liver. In the event of a toxic build-up or overload within the blood, toxins begin to be stored in fat cells, including the myelin sheath that surrounds and protects the nerves as well as nerve tissue. As the toxins then begin to build further, they start to collect and deposit in the connective tissue of our joints, bones, blood and muscle tissue.



*Vinyasa krama*, or the flowing form of a yoga practice, *pranayama* (breathing practices) and meditation are a great way to not only support the body to fight off these toxins daily, but to also transport the much-needed nutrients and antioxidants that maintain health, energy and vitality.

*Vinyasa krama* is the intelligent placement of asana in conjunction with breath and *bandha* (internal subtle locks within the joint capsules of the body). The purpose of linking asana, breath and bandha together is to support the process of cleansing the internal organs while generating heat, which also generates the subtle, internal heat of transformation and fuels *agni*, the digestive fire; the yogis say that if the *agni* is strong, we can better adapt to life's challenges.

### It's good to sweat - vinyasa style

The skin is the largest organ of the body and one of the major benefits of practising yoga is that you allow your skin to sweat, breathe and eliminate waste through the sweat glands, via

a strong heat vinyasa practice. Our primary ability to sweat comes from our major glands known as apocrine and eccrine glands, and it is these glands that are responsible for the detoxification process through asana, where the body burns impurities through the heated action of vinyasa. There are five million sweat glands all over the body, 65,000 in the palms of the hands alone and this perspiration reflex is governed by the medulla oblongata located in the brain stem.

### Detoxifying asana - twists

The most powerful action to detoxify the organs of the gastrointestinal tract comes from the practice of spine twists and inversions. The theory is that spine twists cleanse the internal organs, removing stale blood and allowing a fresh, oxygenated nutrient-dense blood supply to be absorbed. This theory also aims to increase tone of the gastrointestinal tract, thereby improving digestion including assimilation of food, breakdown of fats in support of the liver and gall bladder, transportation of

nutrients, as well as relaxing the enteric nervous system, which dominates how our emotions and thoughts impact on the process of digestion.

Spine twists also support the detoxifying action of the liver and its ability to protect the blood from all unwanted byproducts from the digestive tract. After the skin, the liver is the largest organ of the body and its function is nothing short of miraculous in protecting the body from all internal and external toxins.

An immune system response is also triggered when blood from the spleen and gastrointestinal tract enters the liver through cells known as kupffer cells, which filter bacteria and break down foreign proteins out of the blood. These unique cells found in the lining of the liver respond systemically to pathogens that may cause damage or inflammation. When the liver is healthy and working efficiently, it supplies a consistent stream of energy into the blood by converting glucose into nutrients used by our cells and energy used by the muscles in the stored form known as glycogen.



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### Detoxifying asana – inversions

The human body is sensitive to the fluctuations of gravity because it consists of approximately 70 per cent water. A complex network interwoven into and around every cell progressively moves fluids through valves, pumps and permeable membranes, and is responsible for transporting nutrients into the cells and organs and removing waste products.

It is believed that inversions held for just three-to-five minutes increase blood transport more quickly to the heart, therefore fluids within the tissue will flow more efficiently, facilitating a healthier exchange of nutrients and wastes between cells and capillaries.

In a vinyasa practice there are a variety of postures that aim to invert the torso, whether momentarily or held for longer periods of time at the end of the practice. Inversions support the lymphatic system, responsible for waste removal, fluid balance

and to enhance immunity. The lymphatic system is a closed pressure system, meaning it relies solely on muscular contraction, movement and breathing. The only way to ensure effective lymphatic circulation is with exercise or massage and no other exercise moves lymph like yoga.

### Bandha – the internal subtle locks

Bandha is another tool yogis can work with to support the flow of lymph. *Mula* bandha and *uddiyana* bandha aids in the movement of lymph towards the thoracic duct, while *jalandhara* bandha helps squeeze the lymph nodes around the throat and neck and support the movement of lymphatic fluid. *Maha* bandha (a combination of all three) is a powerful tool to support the movement of lymph during asana practice.

### The mind detox

Research continues to confirm the power of a consistent meditation practice

aiding in the management of symptoms such as depression, anxiety and stress. When the mind is clear and quiet through the practices of meditation, we tend to experience lightness, clarity and the ability to increase focus and concentration for longer periods of time while reducing the biochemical reaction to stress within the body.

An article published in June 2014 in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology* researched the effect of mindfulness meditation practised for 25 minutes for three consecutive days. The study concluded that participants showed a greater resilience to stress with a greater ability to more realistically evaluate social stressors.

Meditation and relaxation techniques also stimulate the aforementioned medulla oblongata, responsible for detoxification through sweat. So with a clear, focused and calm mind, we have the foundation to live to our fullest potential.





### Pranayama – yogic breathing practices

Studies have shown that yogic deep breathing practices multiply this lymphatic cleansing process at 15 times the normal rate by creating a vacuum that literally sucks lymph through the bloodstream and accelerates the pace at which the lymph eliminates toxins.

The most profound and cleansing breathing practice in yoga is *kapalabhati*; *kapal* means skull and *bhati* means to glow or shine. It should only be assumed under the guidance of a qualified yoga teacher.

During the practice of *kapalabhati*, the practitioner applies strong exhalations generated by powerful contractions of the lower belly that pushes air out of the lungs while inhalations release the contraction, which then draws air back into the lungs. The rapid exhalation assists in the removal of accumulated toxins within the cells and tissues of the lungs and digestive system. The cleansing action of this breathing practice on the lungs also supports the propulsion of mucus from the base of the lungs, and is therefore excellent for the therapeutic application of allergies brought on by the spring weather.

Yoga is a holistic practice – it recognises the need for the mind, body and spirit to coexist in harmony with one another in order to restore equilibrium at all levels of existence. So the next time you think about spring cleaning, include yourself in the equation and give yourself the health and vitality you deserve. **NH**

*Emma Palmer is the principal teacher and director of the Moksha Academy of Yoga, [moksha.com.au](http://moksha.com.au)*



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