

GETTING BACK ON YOUR MAT

AFTER A HIATUS CAN BE CHALLENGING.
HERE'S HOW TO RETURN TO THE PRACTICE YOU LOVE.

by Andrea Ferretti

There was a time, in my late twenties, when yoga was the center around which my whole world revolved. I not only took local classes regularly, I pinched my pennies so that I could go to workshops and conferences around the country. I did silent retreats, tropical retreats, and urban retreats. I learned how to treat my excess *vata dosha* with a killer kitchari recipe. I chanted at kirtans and sat in meditation with *sanghas*. I trained to become a teacher. I journaled about yoga and talked about it with yoga friends and journaled about it some more.

Eventually, and fittingly, I joined the editorial team at *Yoga Journal* and had even more opportunities to work with, talk to, and learn from the finest yoga teachers in the country. Yet, despite my access and privilege and devotion to the practice, as the years went by I was getting on my mat less and less often. Perhaps this has happened to you or, you know,

a friend of yours: He's injured or she's pregnant or his favorite teacher left town. There are myriad reasons that a yoga hiatus can strike—and getting back in the groove can be tough.

In my case, the erosion of my physical practice began very slowly, almost unnoticed. The philosophy, the breathwork, and the mindfulness practices that yoga offers had become such a deeply ingrained part of my life that, in a sense, I was always doing yoga. It informed the way I communicated and the way I made decisions. But the time I actually logged on my mat was dwindling.

Hours on the computer, even with regular breaks, led to repetitive stress injuries that left my wrists, shoulders, and neck in searing pain. My limited free time was gobbled up by trips to physical therapy and mind-numbing exercises with *thera-bands*. Then I got pregnant. By the time I was three months along my regular class felt stressful to my joints. (I dabbled in

■ photography by David Martinez





prenatal yoga but only went to class once a week.)

Nine months after my baby was born, I was sleep-deprived and my asana practice was erratic. Yoga was no longer something I had to process or write about in my journal—it was a natural part of my very being. But I was taking the physical practice for granted. And I knew it was time to get back on my mat. I was carrying around extra weight, and I didn't feel like myself anymore. I missed the days of feeling light and graceful in my body.

Accept where your yoga practice is now, and remember that if you stick with it, you'll keep progressing.

That's when I realized that I was scared to go back to yoga class. The thought of doing Chaturanga sent shivers up my spine. My feet hurt from the excess weight and my back hurt from hours of breastfeeding and baby-holding. How would I make it through 90 minutes without requiring a call to the paramedics? How would I cope with going to new teachers who didn't know about my injuries? And how would I fit my new, middle-aged bod into my old yoga outfits, which now looked so flimsy and skimpy?

This point of crisis was actually the perfect time to return to yoga, because I went to my mat with very few expectations. I went to a new studio I'd never been to, and I slowly made my way through my first class. I quelled the inner voice that was embarrassed by my physical conditioning—or lack thereof. And, the truth is, I felt pretty great after I left. Sure, I put my knees down for Chaturanga and I rested in Child's Pose, but 90 minutes of moving and breathing in relative silence felt amazing. And I was genuinely surprised to find that the aches and pains that felt so deeply embedded in my cells vanished pretty quickly after that first class. Strength has been slower to build, but I can see that it is coming as evidenced by my ability to do regular Chaturangas again.

Since that first class, I've slowly eased my way back into a regular asana practice. These days, I'm getting in two classes a week and putting in more time on my mat at home.

For me, having a go-to sequence of poses I can do at home has been vital in successfully returning to regular practice. It makes it easy to practice if my time is tight, and it keeps me in tune with what my body and mind need. Right now, my go-to home sequence is composed of side-bending poses that help me unwind in the evenings. Moving, breathing, and stretching for even 20 minutes before bed is enough to help me release tension, stay present in my body, and sleep well. But in a few more months, when I'm stronger or have more time, my go-to sequence might be a series of arm balances or deeper backbends. If I'm logging more time at the computer, my go-to sequence might become a sequence of shoulder and hip openers to release tension.

It takes motivation, intention, and strategizing to come back to your practice. Here are some of my favorite tips based on my own experience and the advice of some experts.

ACCEPT WHERE YOU ARE When you come back to yoga after a break, your practice will not be exactly the same; it helps to accept that this is perfectly OK.

The key to sustaining a lifelong practice is to realize that yoga, the adaptable art and science that it is, is designed to allow you to change with it. Your desires will change. Your body will age. Your ego will cringe. Your mind will tell you not to go to the mat. You will, in phases, have time to workshop and train and study deeply. You will, at other times, be caring for your baby or an ailing parent or friend, and they will become the first priority. Life is constantly in flux. There are different postures and sequences and styles that can accommodate all ages and stages of life. And the combination of breath and movement, along with guiding our ambitious minds toward nonstriving, creates a magical alchemy that few other physical endeavors can.

As my friend San Francisco Bay Area yoga teacher and mother of three Rebecca Urban reminded me,
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TRIED & TRUE

BUILD A SEQUENCE THAT KEEPS YOU COMING BACK TO YOUR MAT.

THERE ARE MANY, many ways to build a great yoga sequence. If you put too much pressure on yourself to construct what you imagine to be the perfect sequence, you might never get started. One technique is to approach your sequence as a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end.

For the beginning of the sequence, think about warming up your body and mind by easing into things. Give yourself ample time for this process.

Put the most difficult poses—either the most vigor-

ous or the deepest—in the middle of the sequence because your muscles are already warm. Be playful, and tinker and experiment with poses that challenge you. If you want to do a pose like Handstand, or a challenging arm balance or backbend, this is where to make it happen.

The end of the sequence is when you give yourself time to cool down by doing poses that are relaxing. Seated forward bends and supine poses are common as finishing poses for this reason.

This ending phase is not just important physically, it's vital for your mind. You've burned off excess energy by working hard up until now. Whichever poses you choose to do at this point, approach them with a sense of ease, not pushing. Once you start cooling down, the goal is for your mind to feel less agitated and more still. This is the true fruit of the practice, so give yourself time to draw your energy back inside to a place of calm, cool contentment.

The sequence that I like to go to time and again is a sequence of sidebends. They relieve my lower back, they make me feel graceful, and I strive less in sidebends than I do in forward or backbends, which makes them relaxing for me.

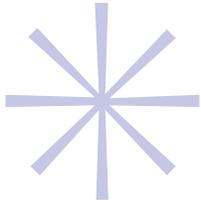
WARM-UP

To begin, sit in a comfortable cross-legged position and close your eyes. Take a few moments to sit quietly. Feel your sitting bones drop down into the ground as your spine rises up out of your pelvis. Begin to breathe gently through your nose, extending your inhalations and exhalations. Let this soft, easy breath be an anchor for your mind throughout the sequence.

1 SIDE-SEATED WIDE-ANGLE POSE *Parsva Upavistha Konasana*

Take a gentle approach to this pose. Sit with your legs wide apart. If your back slumps backward, sit on a blanket. To begin, keep your kneecaps soft. Ease forward, placing your fingertips on the floor in front of you. Then take a sidebend. Place your right fingertips on the floor and reach your left arm overhead. Stay for 5 breaths; inhale to come up and do the other side. Repeat this pattern 2 more times, engaging your legs and flexing your feet.





Build strength and create heat in your body by repeating poses 2 to 5 on each side several times. The first time around, try holding each pose for 5 breaths, then 3 breaths, then 1 breath.



DOWNWARD-FACING DOG POSE

Adho Mukha Svanasana

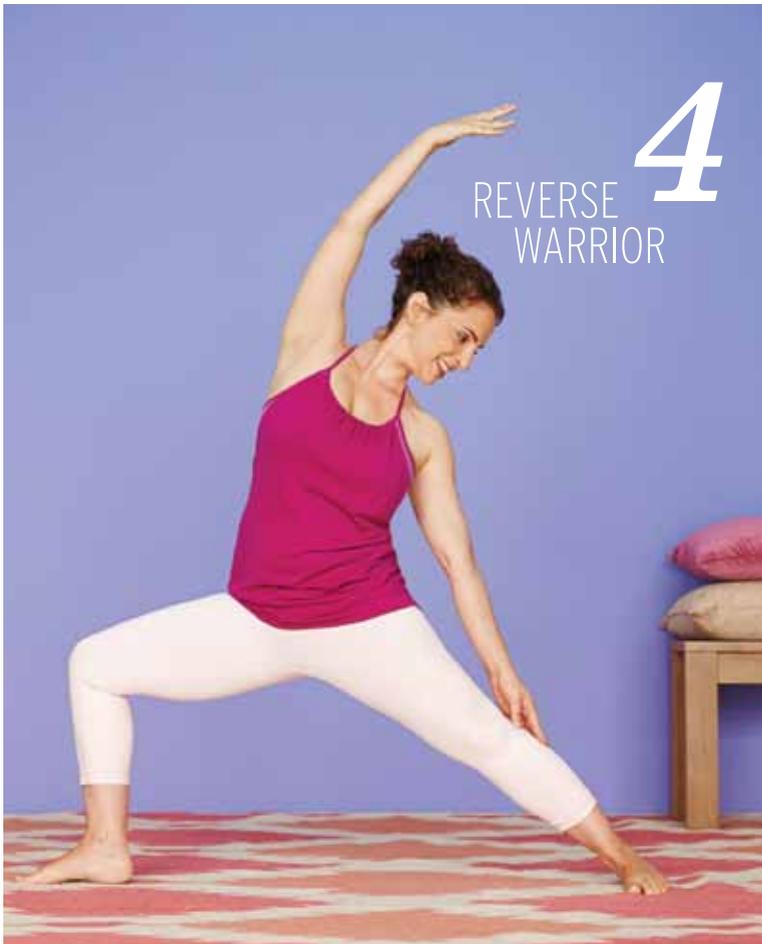
Tuck your toes and lift your hips up and back into Down Dog. Let your first Down Dog be soft—keep your knees bent if you'd like and feel the reach through your arms. Pedal your feet, nod your head back and forth, and stretch the sides of your body. Stay for 5 to 10 breaths.

From Down Dog, turn your left foot out and place your heel on the floor. Step your right foot forward between your hands and come all the way up to standing. With your right knee bent and your left leg straight, reach both arms out to the side and look over your right hand. Stay for 5 deep breaths, keeping your mind soft yet focused.



WARRIOR II POSE

Virabhadrasana II



4

REVERSE
WARRIOR

Place your left hand on your left leg—either above or below the knee—and reach the right arm up and over the right ear. Gaze down, keeping your neck long. Feel the whole sheath of the right side of the body stretching. As you stay for 5 breaths, see that you keep the right knee deeply bent.



5

EXTENDED
TRIANGLE POSE,
VARIATION

Uttitha Trikonasana

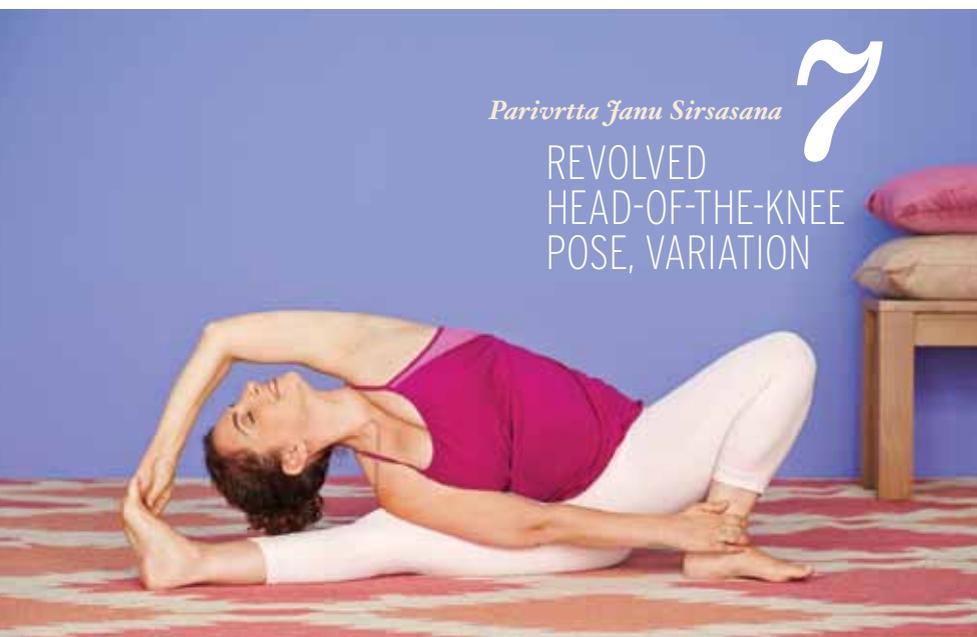
From Reverse Warrior, inhale to come up to Warrior II. Straighten your right leg as you extend your torso and right arm to the right. Place your right hand on your shin or on the floor on the outside of your right foot. Keep breathing into the side body, remembering not to force anything or overdo. After 5 breaths, inhale to come up and return to Down Dog. Repeat Warrior II, Reverse Warrior, and Extended Triangle on the left side, finishing in Down Dog.

PEAK

From Down Dog, come into Plank Pose. Roll to the outer edge of your right foot and lift your left arm up toward the ceiling. Press down through your right arm and, as you lift your hips, extend your left arm alongside your left ear to come into a side-bend. Stay for 5 breaths, then come back to Plank. Rest in Down Dog for a few breaths before taking the other side.



6 SIDE PLANK POSE *Vasisthasana*



Parivrta Janu Sirsasana

REVOLVED HEAD-OF-THE-KNEE POSE, VARIATION



From Down Dog, sit down on your mat and come into Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend). Bring your left leg into a squat. With your right hand, hold onto your left ankle. This may feel awkward at first, but stick with it! Your right hand anchors you in the pose. Reach your left arm up and over. If you can, connect your left hand to the arch of your right foot. (Note: This pose should feel good! If you can't easily connect hand to foot, simply reach the left arm alongside your ear.) Breathe deeply. Use the pull of your right hand against your left ankle to help you turn your chest toward the ceiling. When you feel ready, inhale to come up and switch sides.



FINISH

RECLINED TWIST

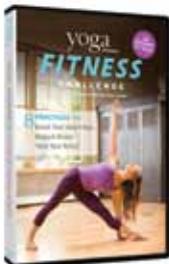
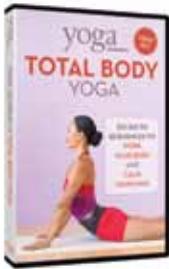
Lie on your back and hug your knees toward your chest. Extend your left leg on the floor and drop your right knee to the left, placing your left hand on your right knee. Reach your right arm to the right. Soften your whole body, allowing it to release into the floor. Stay for 5 to 10 breaths, then inhale as you bring the knees to center and do the other side.



CORPSE POSE *Savasana*

9 Now you get to experience the true fruits of practice: a relaxed and rejuvenated body and mind. Lie on your back with your arms and legs relaxed, palms facing the ceiling. Roll your shoulders up toward your ears, then back and down so that the heart lifts just slightly. See that your lower back feels long and relaxed so that the legs roll out. Draw your attention inward, resting deeply for at least 5 minutes.

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getting back on your mat

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“You don’t have to do your practice the way it looked before. The way it is now is good enough.”

TAKE THE LONG VIEW Just as it’s important to accept where you are now, it’s equally important to know that, if you stick with your practice, you will keep progressing. “On the days when you’re not feeling it, have a long-term mindset,” says vinyasa and therapeutic yoga teacher Tiffany Cruikshank. “You’re starting a new relationship with your yoga practice and, in some ways, your body is totally foreign to you. You have to think of where you will be six months from now as opposed to just killing yourself and giving up.”

NO PRACTICE IS TOO SHORT If your former practice time seems daunting, make it easy to get back into a routine by committing to shorter sessions to start. Cruikshank suggests resuming slowly, shooting for just 10 to 15 minutes of practice per day. “In my experience, having the consistency is more potent than having two hours every two weeks. Once you’ve gotten into the habit of 10 minutes, you’re likely to crave more,” she says.

DEDICATE A SPACE “Leave your mat in a dedicated space,” says Cruikshank. “Put a picture or a book or something inspiring to you there to make it a pleasant place to be.” It doesn’t have to be a big space. Urban simply keeps her mat unrolled in her bedroom with a timer nearby. If her kids walk in while she’s on the mat, they know not to interrupt her.

DON’T OVERDO For your first few classes, work at 50 to 75 percent of what you remember your old “normal” was. In the excitement of returning to class, it’s easy to get swept away and go full throttle in your favorite backbend. But popping right back into an old standby can lead to injury if you’re not ready for it. Go easy at first, and focus on enjoying the process.

START FRESH Try new teachers. Go to different types of classes. Allow yourself to experience your practice anew. And

with that openness, turn off your cynical mind. “When you come back, you get to experience beginner’s mind,” says Iyengar Yoga teacher and physiologist Roger Cole. “You see things with new eyes and from a different perspective.”

Allow for the possibility that a new style might speak to you differently, says Urban. “We have to widen our perspective when yoga gets stale, which means that we have to respect every type, every style, and not poo-poo it. It might just be the practice that reinvigorates your passion.”

TAKE A PRIVATE CLASS If creating your own sequence is overwhelming, consider taking a few private classes with one of your favorite teachers. You don’t have to make a long-term commitment, says Cruikshank. If you meet with someone a few times, they can give you a sequence to help build up your confidence.

INDULGE IN THE POSES YOU LOVE Make your home practice like an indulgent dessert—something you enjoy and savor. Doing poses you love might spark your creativity and keep you practicing for longer. “The one pose that always makes me practice more is Ardha Chandrasana at the wall,” says Urban. “It leads me to the next pose and the next and the next.”

AND TRY THE ONES YOU DON’T LOVE On the flip side, you might try doing poses you don’t love because, as Urban says, “Right now the relationship is getting stale and the hardest poses never get stale. They are reminders that there’s still work to do.”

DEEPEN YOUR CONNECTION TO YOURSELF Remember that, first and foremost, yoga is a path toward quieting your mind. And when you’re able to get quiet, you deepen your connection to yourself. In that vein, be patient with yourself and be inquisitive about what’s going on inside. Use the poses as tools for lasting contentment and joy. ❖

Andrea Ferretti lives and practices yoga in San Francisco. To see more of her writing, visit helloandreaferretti.com.