

yoga for divers

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1. INTRODUCTION

About me

My name is Nina Raem. After graduating from high school, I studied architecture for 10 years and completed two diplomas, one at University Of Applied Sciences Hannover and the other at Technical University Berlin.

I started practicing yoga in 2004 to compensate for my challenging studies and because I was suffering from a chronic illness in the meantime until I became a Sivananda Yoga teacher in 2009. From then on I taught yoga in different studios in Berlin.

In 2012 I decided for a second yoga training and switched to a modern dynamic yoga style called Anusara Yoga.

For about 3 years I have been focusing more on the relatively new yoga style Yin Yoga. I completed my first basic training in 2019, and another module in 2021. I am currently further learning this approach practicing yoga.

In October 2020 I discovered scuba diving in Sardinia before I found my passion for freediving in Egypt last year. I have been in the Aida process since February 2021 and have been through the various courses since then. In November 2021 I also took part in the Judge Course.

About Anusara Yoga

Anusara Yoga is a modern yoga system , invented by American John Friend, a former Iyengar yoga teacher. It is one of the dynamic yoga styles like Asthanga Yoga, Vinyasa Flow, Power yoga. Anusara Yoga is a combination of Iyengar Yoga with a focus on alignment and Vinyasa Flow with a dynamic powerful practice.

For further information check:

<https://www.anusarayoga.com/>

Manuals immersion and teacher training:

<https://www.anusarayoga.com/manuals/>

Book (German language):

Turske, Dr. Claudia & Turske, Vilas. Yoga – Inspiration und Orientierung. 2018 Parapara.

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About Yin Yoga

Yin Yoga is the antagonist of yang yoga styles like Anusara Yoga. In Yin Yoga we stay in postures much longer than in yang yoga. The goal is to stretch the deeper muscle layers, the so-called fasciae.

For further information on Yin Yoga check the following literature:

Blair, Norman. Brightening Our Inner Skies: Yin and Yoga. 2017 Micmac Margins.

Clark, Bernie. The Complete Guide to Yin Yoga. The Philosophy & Practice of Yin Yoga. 2012 White Cloud Press.

Grilley, Paul: Yin Yoga. Principles and Practice. 2016 White Cloud Press.

Powers, Sarah & Grilley, Paul. Insight Yoga: An Innovative Synthesis of Traditional Yoga, Meditation, and Eastern Approaches to Healing and Well-Being. 2020 Shambhala.

Intention

On the one hand the intention is to create sequences that are suitable for all levels and do not require any techniques that are considered advanced in yoga and are basically only suitable for yoga practitioners who have been practicing yoga for several years. On the other hand, it makes sense to me to use the knowledge I have gained to develop a simple but comprehensive yoga practice that all divers can use for themselves at any time.

2. METHOD

First of all, in Chapter 3 the various aida manuals are reviewed for yoga content. In the foreground is what is yoga recommended for and what techniques are used for it. Afterwards the contents of the manuals are critically reviewed for their suitability. In Chapter 4, I develop both yin and yang yoga sequences for before and after diving.

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Oxygen (O₂) saturation

At any given time of resting your blood is fully saturated with Oxygen. You can easily prove this to yourself by putting an Oximeter (device to monitor level of oxygen in your blood) on a finger. The reading for a healthy person is always between 96% and 99%, which is the achievable maximum. If your reading is not within these limits, it is either because you are exerted or you have a specific health condition. Both are indicators that you should not freedive or even hold your breath at this moment.

Being fully saturated with Oxygen at any given time leads us to a striking conclusion:

The preparation for holding your breath has nothing to do with "oxygenating the body"! Instead, the last phase before a breath hold is about physical and mental relaxation and focus. The more relaxed you are physically and mentally, the less Oxygen you are using. This is what enables you to hold your breath safely for an extended time.

The breath hold cycle

Every breath hold is a cycle of four phases:

1. Relaxation Phase
2. One Full Breath
3. Breath-Hold
4. Recovery Breathing

These four phases will be explained step-by-step in this chapter. You can try out everything as you read, and then go into your first full breath hold cycle. Feel free to explore in the dry while lying down on your bed or on a yoga mat.

As soon as you feel like holding your breath in water, the first and most important safety rule of freediving applies: Always freedive with a buddy. A lifeguard at the other end of the pool is not good enough. A person qualified to perform freediver rescue techniques needs to watch over you at all times!

Belly vs. chest breathing

We differentiate between two ways of breathing: The more common way of breathing is happening in the upper part of the chest and is consequently called chest breathing.

The more unknown other part of breathing is happening below your chest and expands your belly on every inhalation. It is thus also called belly breathing.

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Awareness exercise for belly breathing

Awareness Exercise:

Sit upright or lay down on your back. Put your right hand on your belly and place your left hand on your chest. Relax for a few minutes and follow the air that you inhale all the way to your belly. Feel how your right hand moves slightly in and out, while your left hand is not moving at all. This is belly breathing.

It is important to know that you can apply belly breathing at any time, most likely you do it unconsciously while you are sleeping, and for sure you did it in your very early days: Babies can only breathe into their bellies. Their muscles have not yet developed to be able to breathe also in the upper part of the torso.

When you read "belly breathing" keep one of these pictures in your mind, either the happy baby with the round, soft belly, or imagine yourself sleeping peacefully.

In advanced freediving you will learn spectacular exercises to enhance the functionality of your breathing muscles. It is important to note that these exercises are only intended for your dry training, but should not be applied directly before diving.

3. AIDA Manuals

3.1 AIDA 2

COMMENT

In yoga and that might be helpful to improve the relaxation phase in a freedivers breath hold cycle, it is spoken of the full yogic breath and it includes 3 phases of breathing – belly, chest and collarbones.

EXERCISE full yogic breath

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If equalisation is no problem for, but you are not sure which technique you are actually using, test yourself with the following steps:

1. Breathe calmly through your nose
2. Pinch your nose with your fingers
3. Pronounce a "T" or a "K"

If these steps lead to an equalisation, then you are applying the basic principles of "Frenzel", also called the Marcante-Odaglia technique. However, if you need to create any tension with your abdomen while applying pressure, then you are doing "Valsalva" or a mixed form. If still unsure, have your buddy put his/her hand on your belly while you are equalizing. If your buddy registers the slightest movement in your belly while you equalise, you are not applying proper Frenzel technique yet.

Your AIDA Instructor can help you with mastering the Frenzel manoeuvre.

Equalisation stretching and tubular exercises

The muscles around the Eustachian tubes are connected with the jaw and (indirectly) with the neck. Gentle stretches of your neck and jaw muscles thus facilitate equalisation. Below you can find some tips and tricks for practicing stretching to support your equalisation.

First stretch: While standing or sitting with a straight spine, allow your right ear to drop down to your right shoulder. Stay there, feel the tension on your left side of your neck, and let go of any tension you find. When you sense no more tension of which you can let go of, raise your right arm, reach over your head and place your right hand on your left ear. Do not pull on your head! Just allow the extra weight of your arm to pull your head down a bit further. Stay for 5-7 relaxed breaths in this position. Then release the hand and let go of the ear first and slowly raise your head back centre. Repeat on the other side by allowing your head to sink to the left.

Second stretch: Allow your right ear to drop back down to your right shoulder in the same manner as before. Then slowly roll your head to the middle, until your chin touches your collarbone and your crown of the head points forward. Keep an erect spine and avoid pulling your head down with your hands – the weight of the head is just enough. Gently keep rolling your head until your left ear has reached the left shoulder. Now reverse the direction, allowing your chin to touch your collarbone

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These are easy exercises and stretches which can be part of a simple sequence “yoga for divers”

again, before ending the movement on the right side where you started. Repeat a couple of times.

Third stretch (jaw series): Note: The jaw is very fragile and can easily be hurt. It is important to perform the following exercises in a very gentle manner! Stick the tongue out as far as you can, without pulling a face, then retract it all the way back, brushing the tip of the tongue along the roof of the mouth (slightly modified from the original exercise as described in “The Manual of Freediving” by U. Pelizzari/S. Tovaglieri). Repeat a few times. Then, with the tip of your tongue, draw circles on your lips by outlining the lips with your tongue in both directions., Repeat a couple of times. Then gently open the mouth as far as you can without moving any muscles that are not needed to do so. Close the mouth again and repeat a few times. Gently move the jaw from left to right. Keep only a little gap between the teeth. Repeat a few times. Then gently move the jaw front to back. Keep the little gap between your teeth while repeating this a few times. Finally, rotate the jaw gently clockwise, and then in the opposite direction, this is the so-called “camel-chew”. Repeat it a few times.

Ease of equalisation

Regardless of what equalisation technique you are using, always aim for perfect application of the manoeuvre by using only the muscles involved in equalisation and relax all others. Tensing the neck or the jaw are common mistakes making it harder for you to equalise.

In the AIDA3 Course your instructor will teach you how to apply the Frenzel-technique properly. An absolute imperative in this technique is to have and maintain a completely relaxed abdomen. The pressure needed for equalising must solely come from your tongue (or your cheeks), while the throat is locked.

At depth, if you can hear a noise coming from your throat while equalising with Frenzel technique it may indicate that you are falsely trying to support your equalisation by tensing the abdomen. The sound that this creates, the so-called “Grouper call”, is a certain sign that you simply need to relax your abdomen. Do this by shifting your focus on your abdomen, allowing it to completely relax and then equalise with Frenzel technique again. This is one of the most important ways to an efficient equalisation technique at depth.

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Most of them can be avoided. Try to avoid your known allergy triggers (including foods which seem to cause excess mucus production for some, like dairy products, wheat etc.) and drink plenty of fluids to support the flow of mucus.

Even chronic infections of sinuses might reduce in intensity or even disappear after some time of consequently heeding the advice mentioned in the sections below. However, if the cause cannot be eliminated this way, you will need to see an ENT-specialist (doctor who specialises in Ears, Nose and Throat treatments). Medical short-term treatment of blocked sinuses often includes the usage of antihistamines or decongestants. Please note that you cannot dive while taking these forms of medication.

Inhale steam

Inhale steam several times a day helps to liquidate sticky mucus. Pour hot water in a bowl and put a towel over your head or use the fancier version of respiratory steam inhaler. Sitting in the bathroom with the hot shower running is not recommended, as it uses an excessive amount of energy.

Cleansing pranayama

Ask a qualified and experienced yoga teacher to introduce you to the correct techniques of kapalabhati, nadi shodana and bhastrika. These exercises, applied daily, allow you to drain a blockage when it happens and will help you to minimise the probability of future congestions.

Yogic breathing techniques mostly use fast and deep breathing and are thus clearly qualifying as hyperventilation. These techniques help in cleansing, strengthening and stretching your breathing apparatus, however, they should not be applied right before freediving.

Neti pot

Neti pot is a yogic cleansing technique for nasal irrigation with a saline solution. It is important to learn the correct application to avoid negative side effects or even injury. The water has to be boiled for several minutes first and should have the temperature and salinity of tears. Neti pot is done without any pressure.

A word of caution: Spraying water through your nostrils with pressure (with a plastic drinking bottle or similar) can cause injury and has thus to be avoided.

3. AIDA Manuals

3.2 AIDA 3

COMMENT

Neti is recommended for everyone and can be easily integrated into everyday life.

Pranayama, the breathing exercises in yoga are actually already among the exercises for advanced, as they follow the learning of so-called asanas (body postures). In hatha yoga which is all physical yoga it is common to learn body positions first, pranayama second and meditation last. For freedivers who have no knowledge of yoga, it is not advisable to use advanced yoga breathing techniques.

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stretches! In the past, freedivers used “full lung stretches” in an attempt to augment their vital capacity (VC). As we know now, these techniques seem to be associated with long-term damage of lung tissue, especially when combined with “packing”.

Packing (see AIDA4 for a full explanation) is not needed for deep freediving. But old habits die slowly. There are still many websites, books and instructors recommending the combination of packing and stretching. Remember, organised freediving education and especially the associated research is still a very young discipline of only thirty-something years. Thus, knowledge about physiology related to freediving evolves quickly and we all have to keep learning and adapting constantly.

Stretching of diaphragm: Uddiyana bandha

You can train the flexibility of your breathing muscles at the end of the exhalation and



Figure 10: Uddiyana Bandha to Stretch the Diaphragm

3. AIDA Manuals

3.2 AIDA 3

COMMENT

The aida manual definitely lacks explanations of what bandhas are, what role they play in yoga and in what context they are used as a technique. They are understood as “locks of the body” or body closures that hold the energy in the body like a valve, regulate and hold it. It is assumed that by practicing yoga postures and breathing exercises, the life energy „Prana“ flows. Yogis activate the bandhas and optimize this process so that the body does not lose them, but on the contrary can be used in a targeted manner.

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thus reduce the residual volume (RV) of your lungs by exercising uddiyana bandha. You can learn this technique from your AIDA Instructor or your yoga teacher in more detail. Below you can find a short summary of the technique.

In broad strokes, uddiyana bandha is done in these steps:

1. Warm up your breathing muscles by your choice of gymnastics, sun salutations and/or breathing exercises (bhastrika, full yogic breathing, etc.)
2. Take a more than shoulder wide stand, lean forward with your hands are resting on your thighs or knees
3. Exhale completely and lock your throat
4. Pull your navel in towards the spine and then up towards your thorax. Your chest is expanding while the diaphragm gets sucked upwards.
5. Hold
6. Release all muscles
7. Open your airways and let the air flow in gently, restarting to breathe
8. Repeat from step 3 onwards

As a variation you can do this sequence while being seated instead of the leaned forward stance.

Apply correct turn at depth

In your AIDA2 Course you learned how to correctly stop your descent and start your ascent by performing a forward tumble turn. This is of even greater importance when you dive around or beyond your residual volume. Execute your turn at depth slowly and gracefully, always moving in a forward roll. Avoid aggressive or jerky actions in general, and do not perform "opening" movements like the infamous "parachute turn".

Slow adaption and inducing blood shift

Every great journey starts with the first step. And then follows another step, and yet another again. You can gradually increase your depth by going beyond your previous limits in small steps. Do repeated dives to an achievable depth to allow your body and mind to adapt before setting a new goal, which should be challenging, but not too far away from what you have already accomplished. Give yourself time, enjoy

There are three or four bandhas:

1. Mula Bandha: the root lock
2. Uddiyana Bandha: the abdominal contraction
3. Jalandhara Bandha: the neck closure
4. Maha Bandha: that is the merging of all three bandhas

In summary it can be said that bandhas do not operate on the physical level, but on the energetic one that's why bandhas in yoga are definitely a technique for advanced practitioners.

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Uddiyana Bandha

Uddiyana Bandha is a technique from pranayama, which in turn is an essential part of yoga. Freedivers have adopted this technique to work towards reducing the residual volume (RV) of their lungs. With this technique you can effectively stretch your diaphragm and has a similar effect to diving close to or beyond RV. One major advantage of the technique is that it is done dry, no pool or depth is needed, and you can thus incorporate it into your daily training program.

In broad strokes, Uddiyana Bandha is done in the following manner:

1. Warm up your breathing muscles through your choice of gymnastics, sun salutations (a popular yoga sequence) and / or breathing exercises (bhastrika, full yogic breathing, etc.).



Figure 2.2

2. Stand with your feet more than shoulder width apart, lean forward and rest your hands on your thighs or knees.



Figure 2.3

3. Exhale completely and lock your throat.



Figure 2.4

4. Pull your navel in towards the spine and then up towards your thorax. Your chest is expanding while the diaphragm gets sucked upwards.



Figure 2.5

5. Hold your breath for as long as you are able to comfortably. Keep your head straight and do not look up while doing so.

3. AIDA Manuals**3.3 AIDA 4****COMMENT**

Please refer to AIDA 3 manual page 42 and following.

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Soft Palate Exercises

1. Pronounce -AH- three times quickly and powerfully
2. Repeat the above exercise with the following sounds
3. EE-EH-OH-EEK-EET-AK-OK-OOK-OOT

CO₂ Tables

Athletes use breathing tables to increase psychological and physiological tolerance to rising CO₂ levels. Breathing tables in water should only be done a full supervision from a qualified buddy. They can be done dry by yourself, on a bed or sofa. Although anaerobic training, e.g. sustained, high-intensity cardiovascular training also increases tolerance to rising CO₂ levels, it's a significant source of stress, and must be used in limited amounts, with significant recovery. See your AIDA3 Manual for an introduction to CO₂ tolerance training.

Reduction of RV

Finally, reduction of residual volume (as outlined in this manual in [chapter 2.2](#) and in AIDA3) is an effective way to train the body for compression at depth, without risk of overtraining or DCI.

Types of Yoga

Freediving and yoga have been connected since the 1980's, when Jacques Mayol's character, in the film The Big Blue, practices yoga before a competition dive. Since then, many elite freedivers have been active yoga practitioners or instructors. Yoga isn't required for freediving, but many divers benefit from it.

An important part of yoga is pranayama, which literally translated means "extension of the life force". It includes, amongst others, exercises to cleanse, strengthen and control the breathing apparatus. Another reason to practice yoga is mindfulness – presence in the moment, free from past and future – which is the basis of yoga and as useful for freediving. Finally, most forms of yoga increase, if regularly practiced, overall flexibility, which can benefit freedivers.

Freedivers can choose from many forms of yoga. Among them, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Kundalini, Yin or Bikram. Instruction on any form of yoga is beyond the scope of this course. If you are interested in starting practicing yoga, find a local instructor or studio. Freedivers in your area may be able to point you in the right direction.

3. AIDA Manuals**3.3 AIDA 4****COMMENT**

It is definitely advisable to sit down with a freedive instructor who has both years of yoga experience and is knowledgeable about freediving. There are very different styles of yoga and certainly not all of them are equally suitable for freediving. It also makes sense to distinguish whether it is a yoga session that is practiced before the dive or after the dive.

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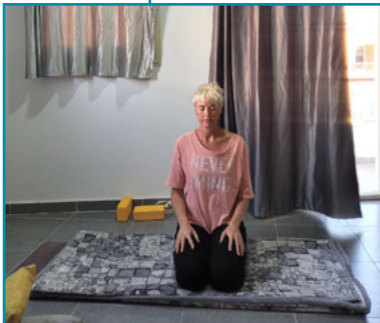
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4. Yoga for Divers

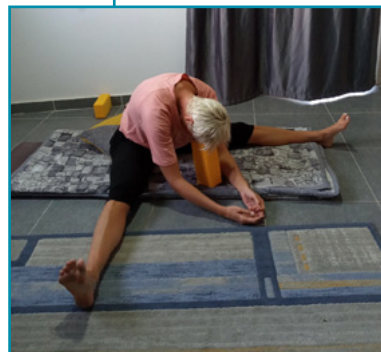
Approach

The approach is to develop both yin yoga and yang yoga sequences, which are practiced either before the dive and afterwards, depending on the situation. The pre-dive sequences focus on the torso, the post-dive sequences focus on the feet, legs and pelvis (see AIDA manuals). The sequences take about 45 to 60 minutes.

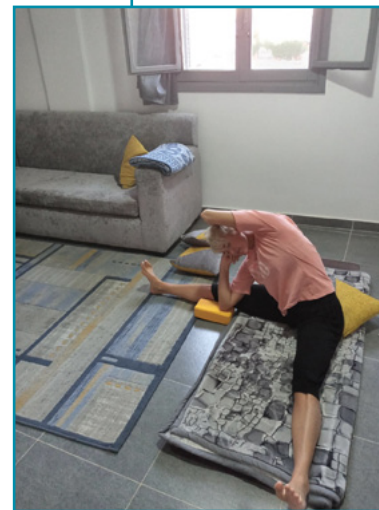
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yoga seats



dragonfly
with variation



dragonfly
side bend

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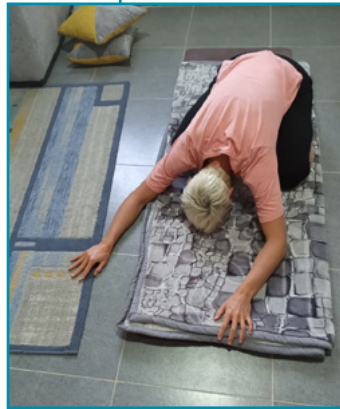
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child's pose

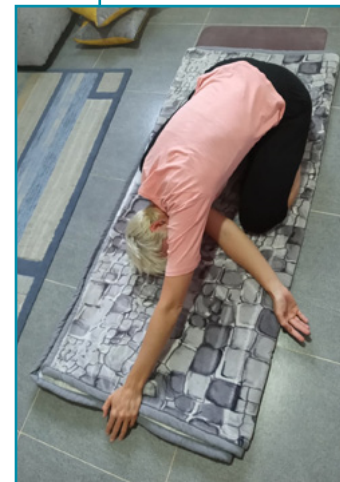


twist in child's
pose



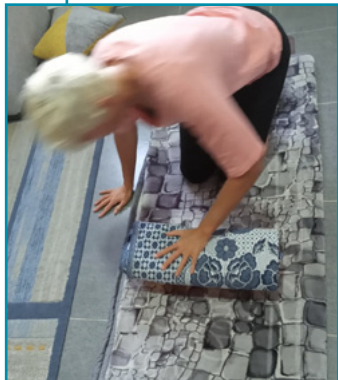
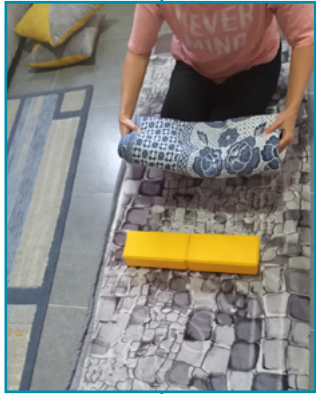
open wings

twist in child's
pose variation
arm position



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fish

sitting twist



banana



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neck stretches



anuloma viloma /
nadi shodhana



relaxation

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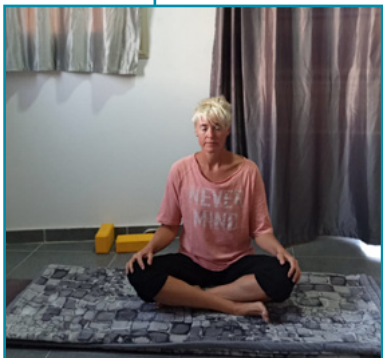
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4.1 Yin Yoga 2 (sequence for after diving)



foot stretches

yoga seats



dragonfly

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dragon with stretch
of thigh muscles



pigeon

dragon with
variation



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sweet seat
with variation



lying butterfly



shoelace



relaxation

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4.1 Yang Yoga 1 (sequence for before diving)



mobilization of the spine



yoga seats, centering with body scan, breathing in full yogic breaths



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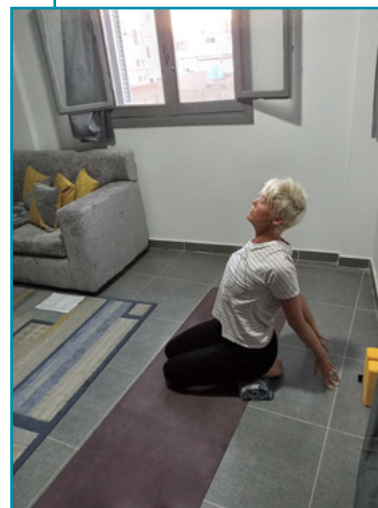
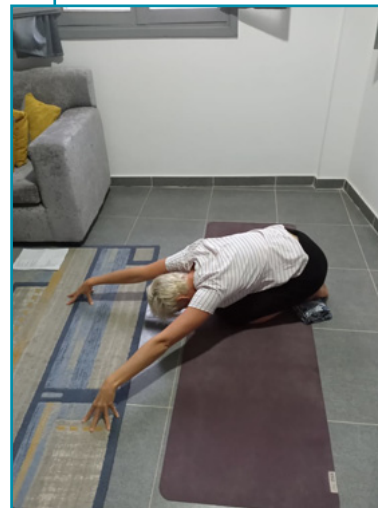
4.4 Yang Yoga 2 (after diving)

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mobilization of the spine



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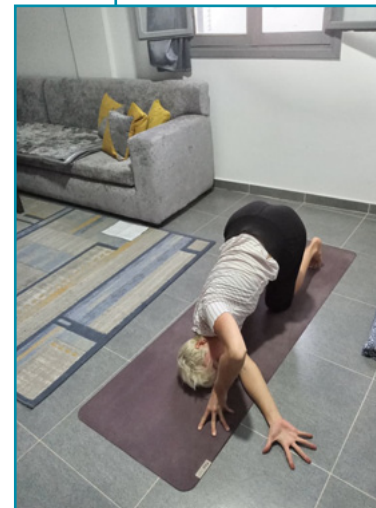
twist of spine
from quadruped



stretches of
side body



mobilization of the
spine: cat & cow



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stretch side body and
twist from child's pose



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vinyasa



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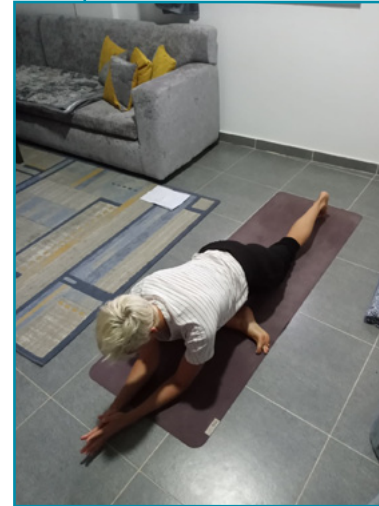
grasshopper



spiderman



dog



pigeon

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package keeping



relaxation



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4.1 Yang Yoga 2 (sequence for after diving)



yoga seats, centering
with body scan,
breathing in full
yogic breaths



foot massage



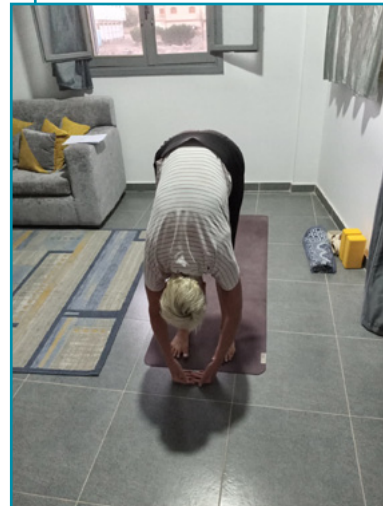
leg stretch

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dog



forward bend



half forward bend

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straddle



pyramid dynamic



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runners stretch



lunch



half standing split



child's pose



half forward bend

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anuloma viloma /
nadi shodhana



relaxation

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As the presentation shows, there are different approaches to how yoga can be used in freediving. In contrast to AIDA manuals, I follow an approach in my explanations that is particularly aimed at freedivers who have little or no experience with yoga and should therefore not use techniques that are only intended for experienced yoga practitioners.

A total of 4 sequences are designed, 2 from Yin Yoga and 2 from Dynamic (or Yang) Yoga which can be practiced before and after diving. There are, of course, countless ways of putting together the various postures and breathing techniques, so that my suggestions can only be viewed as one of many options. Other than that, the sequences are general yoga classes. It also makes sense to me to adapt the Yoga lessons to the individual athletes.

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Aida4 Master Freediver (Assistant Instructor) v1.03 DECEMBER 2020.

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