

THE JOYS OF PLAYFUL MOVEMENT

with Jacquelyn Cooper and Max



Carefree movement can help us release tension and naturally let go of unnecessary mental and physical effort.

Do you remember playing as a child; rolling around on the grass just for fun, spinning around and around on the spot to see what it felt like when you stopped and the world continued to swirl, stopping to look at a ladybird to count its spots or to smell a rose? Nobody teaches us how to do that, we just do it.

As young children we were more connected to ourselves in the moment and trusted our instincts, following them without even realising what we were doing. I remember moments of feeling completely carefree and that the world was full of limitless opportunity and joy. This is how regular genuine yoga practice can make us feel, it can reconnect us with our true nature.

However, in the early days during yoga classes, I found myself trying hard to 'achieve' more. I tend to push myself too much and sometimes end up gaining tension. These days I try not to compete with myself both on and off the mat but I still require constant reminders to relax! Luckily, I have two inspirational teachers, Maarten Vermaase and Peter Blackaby, who in their own distinct way, with complete integrity and depth of understanding and knowledge, have helped me immensely in the quest to return to being comfortable in my own skin.

It is well documented that children learn more easily whilst playing, as opposed to being told exactly what to do with no opportunity to test it out. As adults I believe we can also learn a lot about ourselves when we combine a playful approach with the support of guided direction. Playing is also a great way to let off steam, which is why in Sweden –

and in many other countries around the world – playgrounds are being built for grown-ups to combat the effects of too much stress and promote health and wellbeing. So, can yoga be a form of 'playing'?

Recently, I have been exploring the experience of more energetic but natural movements, such as rocking and rolling interspersed with periods of resting. I have found it an excellent way to shift one's mindset into the present by relaxing into the resulting sensations and effects on breathing during the rest period. It can also reveal our engrained beliefs and expectations of what we can or can't do. Some of my students often initially firmly believe that they can't roll forwards and backwards on the floor comfortably, only to find out that with some gentle encouragement and guidance – and after some practice – that they can. It is not uncommon for me to have to call a halt to the rolling as people are enjoying it so much that they don't want to stop!

Our acquired habit of holding our bodies and minds in a fixed way can become so entrenched that it is difficult to lose. Movements which start off slowly and gently and continue to become more and more vigorous can allow us to naturally loosen. A great example of this is the 'wobbling' Egyptian dance movement (on page 28) taught to me by the late professional dancer Heather Burby. It can feel liberating to move in this way and can stop us from taking ourselves too seriously! We can literally shake off our tension and free up our capacity for joy.

Don't take my word for it, try it for yourself!



Shake, wobble 'n roll

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1. Riding the wobbly bicycle

Let your belly, hips, shoulders, neck and face relax to allow the ground to support your full weight and breathe easily. Imagine you are riding a wobbly bicycle and your legs are loose and feather light. Let your legs roam freely, fully exploring the space around you changing direction at will. Tune into the sensations that arise and be guided by your body on how to move in a way that feels best for you.



2. Circling and shaking floppy hands and feet

Rotate your hands and feet at the wrists and ankles very loosely using only 2/10 effort. Then let your hands and feet go very floppy and give them a vigorous shake, as if you are trying to shake off gloves and socks that are far too big for you! Let the rest of your body soften and be moved.



3. The playful mini tantrum!

Let your feet and legs relax completely and kick your heels towards your buttocks. Start slowly gradually becoming more and more energetic, possibly tapping your heels onto your buttocks. Imagine you are having a playful mini tantrum and that you are symbolically kicking away anything that is no longer useful or relevant to you. Make sure you aren't holding your breath!



4. Rocking and rolling boat

Place the soles of your feet together on the floor and let your legs feel heavy and flop out to the sides. Set off a pelvic rocking motion, very subtle to start with gradually becoming like a boat gently rocking from side to side in the water. Try not to consciously move your legs, just let them be moved as a result of the gentle rocking across your sacrum. Enjoy the self massage!



5. Rolling around on the floor

Imagine your body is very soft, as if it's made of marshmallow and try to let go of the feeling that your body is solid. Roll backwards, slowly at first from sitting and then forwards along the ground. Feel your way, noticing and releasing any unnecessary holding or effort. Commit your whole self to the momentum of rolling backwards and forwards, without leaving your top or bottom half behind. Imagine you are like a three or four year old, rolling on the floor. Repeat until it starts to feel more and more comfortable over many days, weeks, years!



6. Shaking feet and legs upside down

When you have rolled backwards come up into a comfortable half shoulderstand and support your back with your hands and arms. Shake and kick your legs as if you are trying to shake very soft loose muscle off of your bones.



7. Happy dog tail wagging – this needs imagination!

Come to be on all fours, imagine you have a tail like a dog and you've just seen your owner after a long break. Let your tail bone wag from side to side, gently at first, causing your hips and spine (as they are attached) to be moved. Then you realise they have a treat for you and your tail wags uncontrollably with joy! This might take some playing with until you can start to notice and lose any unnecessary holding in the body, which inhibits your body from moving freely.



8. Down dog leg 'jiggle'

Come into your version of downward dog. Let one knee bend and the other heel drop towards the floor. Then, slowly at first, start to alternate the movement, speeding it up gradually until it becomes a sort of loose leg and buttock jiggle.



9. The Egyptian wobble dance

Allow your bodyweight to drop through your legs and soles of your feet so that you feel a really stable connection to the earth. Bend one knee forward and move your opposite knee backwards, without locking it out, and alternate the movement. Gradually speed it up more and more as if you are trying to shake off soft, loose muscle from your bones. Continue to play with how energetically you can shake your legs backwards and forwards until your buttocks, thighs and belly start to 'wobble' like jelly on a plate. Gradually slow it down and finally stand still and rest.



10. Relaxing in natural awareness

After each of the above practices, remain in a supported position, lie down or sit upright without disturbing yourself, so that you can just rest there. Tune into the immediate sensations, which are naturally arising in your awareness without any need to mentally comment on what you can feel or trying to change it in any way. Continue to let go of all unnecessary mental and physical effort with each new out-breath without holding anything back so that you can completely relax ...



WRITTEN BY JACQUELYN COOPER
Jacquelyn started yoga over 25 years ago, as a way to unwind and manage anxiety, and gradually became hooked. She started the BWY Teaching Diploma on the suggestion of her Dutch yoga teacher Femmy Brug. She qualified in 2004 and became increasingly interested in the meditation aspect of yoga. She met Maarten Vermaase during her time as BWY County Representative and subsequently completed his Progressive Stages of Meditation Module Level 1 and 2 and Pranayama course. Jacquelyn continues to study and practice with Maarten, including learning THE (Tibetan Healing Exercises). She enjoys teaching yoga and basic Shamatha, or calming the mind meditation, in the form of termly courses and workshops in her Bedford based studio, plus weekend retreats in the Cotswolds. Email: jacquelyn@halcyonyoga.com Visit: www.halcyonyoga.com Facebook: HalcyonYogaUK Photography by Russell McCraith