

Water + yoga = bliss!

Yoga teacher Denise Cullen discovers how underwater asanas can take your practice to a new level.



* Still waters

According to Bridget Dennis of Zama Yoga (www.zamayoga.com.au), which has studios in both Brisbane and Toowoomba, aqua yoga can be practised by anyone, but is particularly good for people who have arthritis or joint pain, or are recovering post-surgery. "This is because the body bears less weight in water, and the water's buoyancy helps take pressure off the joints," she says. For the same reasons, aqua yoga is also beneficial for prenatal or postnatal women, or anyone with injuries or musculoskeletal conditions who finds their condition aggravated by

Although it is possible to undertake inversions such as Sirsasana (headstand) and Sarvangasana (shoulder stand) in water, aqua yoga is typically practised in water that is anywhere from chest to shoulder to chin height. "We do it all with the head out of the water, because apart from people being able to swim or not, they generally don't like getting water in their ears or getting their hair wet," Wanmer says. Francoise Freedman of UK-based Birthlight, which offers aqua yoga teacher training, says that warm water (around 31-34°C) is recommended. Many traditional poses can be easily modified to suit the aquatic environment, particularly when the pool wall is used like the studio floor. Balance poses, including my personal favourite Natarajasana (dancer), are especially accessible in the water. For end-of-class relaxation, nothing beats Savasana (corpse pose), which can be performed with the aid of a noodle for people unable to float on their own.

Holding a pose in water is an opportunity to embrace a yogic perspective by welcoming a little extra challenge in a less than perfect world.

weight-bearing exercise. Wanmer recalls one woman finding her way back to yoga after suffering a stroke. "She'd had to take so much medication that she'd put on an enormous amount of weight," Wanmer explains. "But inside this person was a young, slim, active girl. Balancing for her was a really big thing. I used to say, 'Let's do it on your good side and then see if we can transfer that to your other side.'"

Keen to try aqua yoga? Check your local pools and fitness centres, and if all else fails, pick up some tips online. Wanmer is developing an online course, while White Crow Yoga (www.whitecrowyoga.com) offers a DVD which runs just short of one hour. Aqua Kriya Yoga (www.aquakriyayoga.com) offers a photo-rich book that will help you transfer your practice from the mat to the pool. So - go make a splash!

IM standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) feeling warm water lapping at my chin. Eyes closed, I shift my weight, drawing the sole of my right foot up to rest against my left inner thigh to enter Vrksasana (Tree Pose). I remain still for several long, deep breaths, the pressure of the water compressing my chest. Bringing my hands together in Anjali Mudra, I realise that I'm no longer tethered by gravity, but drawing on core balance as the water both stabilises and supports me. All I can hear is my breathing, a distant splash, the song of a magpie in a nearby tree.

Aqua yoga has been dubbed "a fad" by its detractors. But according to long time Brisbane-based yoga practitioner Susan Wanmer (www.susanwanmer.com.au), aqua yoga is not about taking a set of asanas and dropping them in at the deep end, but instead using the water as a medium and engaging with its unique properties. Wanmer, who teaches both on land as well as in the water,

says the pool represents the primordial ocean, which calls us on a deep, primal level; it functions as the water-filled womb in which we floated to the soundtrack of our mother's breath and heartbeat. The feeling of water on the skin and the awareness of our breath facilitates deep yogic focus.

In one's element

Water's properties are also an invitation to mindfulness because, in the pool, people are immersed in an environment that's constantly in motion. "So while the water is supportive, it can also be challenging," explains Wanmer. "Other people's movements naturally create some turbulence, which can unsettle and distract new practitioners. I've had people huff and puff and say it's annoying, but it's no different from what happens in the studio, when people complain they're having difficulty balancing because their mat is in the way, or the floor is uneven."

When students holding a pose find the water buffeting them, Wanmer reminds them it's a great opportunity to adopt a yogic perspective by remaining untroubled, drawing on a sense of playfulness, and "welcoming the little bit of extra challenge in a less than perfect world."

More and more research is pointing to the health benefits of being in, and around, water. For example, the Blue Mind (www.bluemind.me) gatherings which began in San Francisco in 2011 bring together neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, marine biologists, artists, conservationists, doctors, economists, athletes and urban planners, to explore the growing body of research relating to "how our brains, bodies and psyches are enhanced by water", says founder Wallace J. Nichols. In doing so, Western science is merely tapping into what ancient civilisations knew all along. Ancient Egyptian paintings show people preparing to bathe; the Romans erected communal

baths; and the Greek physician Hippocrates prescribed spring water as an antidote to illness.

Is it any wonder we feel an affinity to water? Nichols writes that water is the most omnipresent substance on Earth. Around 80 percent of the world's population live close to oceans, rivers or other waterways. Water makes up a predominant part of our bodies (60 to 78 percent) and our brains (80 per cent). The benefits of hydrotherapy, including increased circulation, reduced pain, enhanced balance and improved core stability, have long been recognised. Research demonstrating the effectiveness of flotation tanks as adjunct treatment for a range of conditions, including high blood pressure, tension headaches, insomnia and depression, continues to emerge. *

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