

Nature and Yoga: The  
Connection Between Mother Earth and Yoga.

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Part One:  
What going into nature  
Teaches us about ourselves and how it  
Furthers our yoga practice.

Part Two:  
Nature Imagery. A look into how we currently  
Use nature imagery in yoga and  
How to further use it to deepen our practice.

### Part One:

“I felt my lungs inflate with the onrush of scenery- air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, “This is what it is to be happy.”-Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar

The feeling we experience when we step out of our routine, out of our buildings, out of our everyday lives, and step into nature, feels as though we skipped all 8 limbs of yoga and went straight to Samadhi. We experience a pull to nature that is undeniable. Our lives and our mind automatically feel lighter and simpler. Nature takes us to a place of being that we spend days, weeks, even years trying to attain in our yoga practice. This is why nature and yoga so naturally interweave together and why we benefit immensely from incorporating nature into our lives and into our yoga practice. Randal Williams says it perfectly when he says, “When I go into nature, it’s like going to see a teacher, being able to go from the ruts or stuckness into an atmosphere that is full of wisdom. There’s very little for me to do other than be open to the prana and the modeling that’s available in nature, watching the clouds pass through the sky, feeling the wind against my skin, being reminded of sensation. These are all pranic expressions that remind me or encourage me to remember that my stuckness and my contraction will also pass. For me, it’s like the ultimate yoga.”

When we experience trauma or unpleasant feelings, we tend to build up distractions to direct our attention away from the pain and onto something else. We would rather watch all nine seasons of *The Office* than deal with something that makes us anxious, sad, or angry. Walking into nature, phone turned off, fully present, those distractions are stripped away and we are given the opportunity to confront ourselves, completely and freely. A lot of times, even with its various threats and hazards, nature feels safe to people; like home. It provides the perfect environment to address ourselves with a deep knowing that we are going to be okay. There are no phones ringing, no sirens, and no one next to you coughing, there’s just you and nature. Yoga gives us the tools to start stripping away the layers we’ve built up around ourselves so that we can get to the core of who we really are, our true self. In this same way, nature strips away distractions in life, the

things we “need” to live life and the things that we use as distractions. We are no longer working on or distracted by the outside, which gives us opportunity to start working on the inside. Seeing nature in its purest form helps us to see ourselves in our purest form.

Not everyone can hop on the nature train and be calm or comfortable. We all know someone who if placed in the wilderness would automatically respond with a, “Ew bugs. Ew dirt,” kind of attitude, but that’s OKAY. One of the most frustrating yet necessary things we say in yoga is that whatever is difficult for you or makes you uncomfortable, is the thing you need to be doing most! This is when we start to tap into pratyahara and we begin to draw our attention away from the unpleasantness of nature and direct it towards all of the good that nature provides. Angela Pirisi talks about even taking those “annoyances” and using them to enhance your experience, “You have to get students to think more in terms of embracing rather than battling the elements. It can help to remind them that a breeze can deepen your breathing, the warm sun can deepen poses by making muscles more pliable, and a ladybug can invite you to focus on something small and still.” When we overcome our fears associated with being in nature, it allows us to confront our larger life fears calmly and with confidence. Tresca Weinstein says that, “Confronting and moving through discomfort in the context of nature opens the door to overcoming fear in other areas of life.” When we apply our experience with yoga, we know that if we come back to our breath, come back to the current moment, then these threats are not as exponential as we make them out to be. We see a spider and instead of screaming and running away, thinking that we might die if that spider comes near us, we instead bring our awareness to our breath and realize that that spider is just living its life and that its sole purpose on this earth is not to murder us. We bring the present moment and a calmer perspective to the situation so that we can carefully walk away and continue with our day. If we are able to do that with a spider, imagine then the opportunities in our lives were we could also apply this knowledge! In the end, we trust ourselves to know that we can handle anything that nature presents us with. Michelle Apland, codirector of Flying Deer Nature Center in New Lebanon, comments on this by saying, “the key to gaining more comfort in and

appreciation of our surroundings-in both life and nature-is tuning in to our senses and intuition, trusting that they'll give us the information we need." Everything we need to coexist with nature and to live our lives without fear is already inside of us, we just need to use the tools that nature and yoga give us so that we can access that strength.

Much of our fear comes from a resistance to change. People construct their lives around a routine that if interrupted, often induces fear and anger. Unfortunately, we cannot sit down with the universe and map out a plan of how we would like our lives to be. Change happens. Knowing this and knowing that everything is temporary makes change less ominous and makes the current moment more important. If nature is anything, it is unpredictable. One minute it's blue skies and sunny, the next minute the clouds roll in and you're caught in a downpour, soaking you from head to toe. One minute you're walking peacefully by yourself with no disturbances, the next minute a few raccoons are mischievously crossing your path. It's safe to say that we never know what we're getting into when we walk out of the controlled comfort of our homes and into the wildness of nature. The beautiful thing is that we can not only learn from this change, but we can embrace it! We can use nature to help us see that change is an opportunity to experience something different and lovely. The unexpected rain changes from a nuisance, to a welcomed surprise that allows us to further feel the wonder of nature. Michelle Apland comments on the beauty of nature's impermanence's by saying, "The practices of yoga and meditation allow our preoccupation with the past or projections into the future to gently fall away, leaving us in the present moment. Nature is a living example of this; from one moment to the next clouds may cover the sun, raising gooseflesh on your skin-then, in the next moment, the cloud passes, bathing you with light and heat. Our desires cannot affect the path of the clouds; all we can do is accept the not knowing and live amongst the changes. In nature, we have this constant, beautiful example of how change is natural, that no season is any more beautiful than any other season, and that change itself is part of the exhilaration, joy, and wonder in life." When we move away from seeing nature's

unpredictability as an obstacle to overcome, and begin to see it as a natural and beautiful part of life, then we can begin to find peace in the present moment.

One of the best tools that we have to bring ourselves back to the present moment are our senses. Sometimes we are only using one or two, while some of the time we are using none and our awareness only exists in our mind. Being in nature is sometimes a shock to our system because that environment allows us to use ALL of our senses at once. We hear the trees bustling around us and the birds talking above us, we see the overwhelming burst of green and pops of purple, red, blue, etc., we taste the fresh air and rain falling from the sky, we smell the earthy scents of trees, bushes, flowers, and air, and we feel the gentle breeze lightly brushing up against our skin. Greg Dilisio talks about how this deeper connection brought on by our awareness to our senses changes our neurochemistry, "If someone is in the woods and you ask them to listen and smell, their whole neurochemistry changes. They begin to collect prana, to breathe deeper. The nervous system starts to relax, like a baby in its mother's arms." Nature doesn't live in the past and isn't worrying about the future, it's fully present and invites us to be present as well. Once we are aware of our senses and allow them to guide us to the present moment, then we can begin to bring that awareness inwards. Lisa Marie Haley talks further about our present awareness by saying, "Outdoors offers another level to focus on-the smell of nature, such as the ocean, pine, grass. When you start to smell the outdoors, it's as if nature wants us to be present and breathe deeply." All we need to do is follow the cues of nature and we will inevitably discover a deeper understanding of ourselves.

Being present in nature, while allowing us to feel a sense of connectedness, also allows us to see and feel how small a role our lives play in this world. It is almost impossible to stand on a cliff's edge, staring out at a valley, miles of forest, or a mountain range that reaches out further than the eye can see, and not think, "wow, I am so small compared to the infinite greatness of nature." Mother nature is constantly putting us in our place whether it's by an extreme weather event like a tornado, lighting storm, etc., or by just allowing us to look upon its vastness with awe. It takes our ego, which is usually inflated, and squashes it, allowing us to be completely humbled in its presence. From that place of humbleness we are then

able to direct our attention to the needs of others instead of focusing on our own needs. Our urge to give instead of take is heightened and our role in this world grows a little bit larger.

People who spend a lot of time outdoors often have the same response when asked why they love nature, which is, “it feels like home.” We experience a sense of rightness when we are in nature; we get the feeling that we are supposed to be there. These feelings make perfect sense because we ARE meant to be there. Humans didn’t evolve from air-conditioned houses, where they sat around watching television all day; we evolved from the earth, from nature. We often feel a separateness from nature, an us and it kind of mentality, but we came from nature, we are not separate from it. Randal Williams says, “What we tend to forget is that nature is, well, in our nature. When all is said and done, it’s our home, so we feel a particular resonance with nature. It’s in our DNA, it’s in our bones.” It’s in our DNA; it’s in our bones. Before we had all the distractions and instructions that take us away from our true selves, we lived amongst the simplicity of nature; it was a part of who we were. It’s the environment that best compliments our yoga practice because it is the place where we were originally us, human beings. Williams talks about how when we’re in nature, we are connected with what the Native American cultures call our original instructions, “Being in nature means leaving behind the alterations that humans have made to the landscape, and entering a world in which all living things, including people, are following what Native American traditions refer to as our “original instructions”-the inborn information that makes flowers grow and squirrels search for nuts. For us, that means simply showing up and practicing being our most present, authentic selves-much as we do on the yoga mat.” The definition of what being human now and what being human originally meant are dramatically different. Michelle Apland talks about this by saying, “We are more naturally ourselves when we step away from our ideas of how things are supposed to be. Our lives are intrinsically connected to nature, and being conscious of that relationship is an important acknowledgement of what it means to be human.” Nature is our home; we are supposed to be there. We need to embrace that intuition; that knowing that nature isn’t something separate from us that we need to

conquer, but to see it as our original home, the place where we come from and the place where we will inevitably end up.

Once we embrace the idea and feeling that nature is our home, we can then begin to accept that we are connected to every living thing around us. We see life as not simply something that can walk and talk and drive cars and make money, but we see it as something that exists in everything. Our life is no different than the life of a tree, or an animal, or a river. We are able to see that while every living thing is trying to survive, it is also giving back to the earth every single day. Trees take in water and carbon dioxide and sunlight, but it gives fruit, shade, oxygen, etc. Animals may take the lives of other animals but they fertilize the earth and spread plant life throughout an entire region. We live for each other. A wonderful example of this is the removal of wolves in Yellowstone National Park in the early 1900's. Their removal caused their prey, the elk, to populate places where they normally wouldn't, which cause certain trees and plant life to decline significantly, which then had an effect on the flow of the rivers! Every living thing has a purpose and an energy that it contributes to the world and no role is bigger or better than another's role. In yoga, we are constantly trying to quiet the mind, lessen the ego, and get to a place of peace, a place of being. Nature is an exact example of what we are aiming for every single time we step onto our mat or sit down for meditation. Nature is peace, it is quiet, and it exists perfectly within our world. We are nature and nature is us. Hilary Kimblin says it perfectly when she says, "Yoga means 'union', and when it's practiced outdoors it seems like the union with nature, humanity, and the universe is truly felt."



## Part Two:

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn.”-John Muir

In the yoga world we are quite familiar with imagery, having heard, “now press back into your downward facing dog” or “ground down with your standing foot and reach your arms up like the branches of a tree”, about a million times in our yoga classes, but for the majority of teachers, the imagery ends there. We can mention a pigeon while we’re in Eka Pada Rajakopotasana, but what is that really doing for our practice? Yoga is a melding of the mind, body, and spirit, so when we simply just place an image in our minds, we are only using the mind aspect of our practice. When we start to interweave more vivid imagery into our yoga, we touch a subtler place in our practice and that’s the place where we begin to connect with our body and with our spirit. For example, instead of just momentarily picturing a pigeon as we glide into Eka Pada Rajakopotasana, we try to imagine lifting our chest like a proud pigeon, reaching our beautifully colored front bodies towards the sky as we slowly begin to bow. Once in to pose you use that pride to find confidence in a place that may be uncomfortable. This imagery changes the pose for us. It takes us out of our heads, it subtly brings awareness to parts of our bodies we often neglect, but most importantly, the more we allow ourselves to get out of gross and into the subtle, the more we can connect with our body and spirit.

Nature is such a great form of imagery because it’s so simple and something that everyone has seen and can relate to. Tias Little says in the article, *Metaphor, Metaphysics, and the Mystical*, “Throughout the yoga tradition, imagery has served to evoke feeling the sense of communion, especially feeling that heightens one’s aesthetic appreciation for the natural world and for the intricate workings of the inner body. Poetic language that evokes beauty and elevates awareness serves to increase one’s capacity for sensitivity and gratitude.” How often do we experience a work of art, a poem, or a glimpse at a mountain range and just get lost in its beauty?

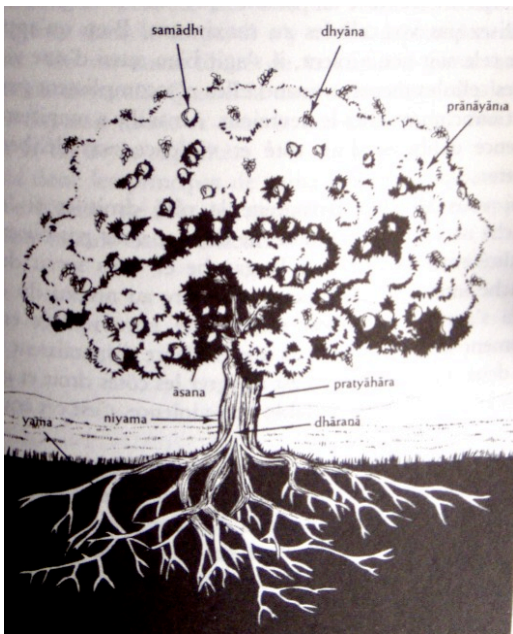
Our thoughts become quite and we are filled with an emotional rush that comes with viewing the small details of these beautiful images. Randal Williams of Kripalu Center talks about how using an image can bring us to a more subtle place in our practice by saying, "You're using the image as a way of leveraging the physical body to encourage change-a change of space and, along with that, a change of mindset and release of prana into the soul. The image in the mind delivers the data or the instruction-the picture, the vision-and if one subscribes to that vision, the physical body is supported to go further. An interesting principle here is that the subtler we go into the person's experience, moving from the physical to the emotional, from the emotional to the breath body, from breathing to mental, from mental to intuitive, the subtler and subtler we go, the more powerful we become....The endgame here is that the most subtle substance around is the universe, or some folks prefer the term "God," and this is so subtle that it pervades everything and dictates the rhythms of everything, and each of us has this inside us-it is what provides mystery of life in the first place." The subtler we get, the more we connect with our true selves and the universe. Let's look at some examples of nature that we use in our practice and when/why we use them:

#### The Tree:

The tree is often referenced in yoga in terms of grounding. We often hear the cues to root down into the earth with our feet or to bring awareness to the connection our body is making with the Earth beneath us. Vriksasana, or tree pose, is called so because the person practicing the pose can imagine and then mimic a tree while performing the asana. While in Vriksasana, we ground through our standing foot, growing our roots deep into the earth, we stay strong in our standing leg and midsection like the sturdy/stabilizing trunk of the tree, then we lift our chest and gently raise our arms towards the sky, reaching towards the sun like the leaves on a branch. This imagery acts as a mental drishti for the mind.

Another significant reason why trees play such a vital role in our yoga is their direct connection with our breath, our prana, and our life. We could not live without trees, they provide the life force that keeps us healthy and alive. They also provide

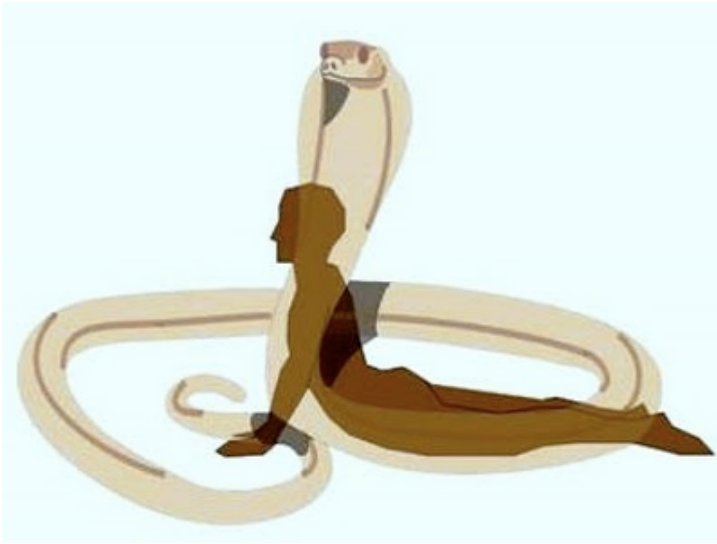
food for us and shade from the sun. If there were one thing in nature that truly provides us with all the things necessary things we need live, it is the tree. When we practice pranayama, we can use the image of the tree to cultivate a better appreciation for the oxygen we are taking in. Next time when you practice, imagine a tree in your mind and every time you inhale, imagine air, or an energy source coming out of the tree and then into your body, and when you exhale, imagine your breath, or an energy, coming out of you and into the tree. This pranayama imagery will allow you to not only see how energy is shared by everything around us, but the direct significance the tree's energy has on our lives. Another pranayama exercise would be to imagine a tree , on your inhale say the word "thank" in your head and on the exhale, say the word "you", constantly giving gratitude to the tree who is allowing you to breath; allowing you to live.



BKS Iyengar uses the structure of the tree to explain the 8 limbs of yoga in his book, The Tree of Yoga. The roots are the yamas, the trunk is the niyamas, the branches are the asanas, the leaves are the pranayama, the bark is pratyahara, the sap is dharana, the flower is dhyana, and the fruit is Samadhi. This is a wonderful image to represent a person's journey through the 8 limbs. During our yogic lives we are constantly trying to move from the ground up. From moving from the gross to the subtle, maybe trying to uncoil our kundalini

energy, or just trying to take our minds from a dense overcrowded place, to a place of lightness/clarity, our journey is very similar to that of a tree. BKS Iyengar says, "...The Tree of yoga needs to be carefully followed through its various stages if we are to experience its results...Thus, the tree of yoga—yoga-vrksa—leads us by its practice through layer after layer of our being, till we come to live and experience the ambrosia of the fruit of yoga, which is the sight of the soul."

## The Cobra:



The Cobra has always been known for its ferociousness and for the unique perspective it has of the world. It sheds its skin, leaving that which is no longer serving it behind and moves on, growing new skin that is more cohesive with its life. We can learn a lot from the cobra, mostly so while performing

Bhujangasana. Robert Butera, Ph.D. describes how we can use the image of the cobra and channel its unique qualities to better perform Bhujangasana, “The cobra moves with its belly on the ground but must reach up to see clearly, much as we are often kept busy with worldly pursuits and have to make an effort to reach for higher goals. It takes faith and courage to rise about the material world and peer into the unknown spiritual world. Once the upper body is poised above the ground in Cobra Pose, we must accept whatever it is we see from this new vista. The lower back is consciously relaxed while the eyes remain focused on heaven.” With curiosity and vigor, we raise our front bodies off of the earth, giving us a new perspective, a new way of viewing the world, we relax our low back, our gluts, and ground our legs down into the earth as we lift our chest towards the sky. Imagining the cobra during Bhujangasana gives the pose meaning and a more metaphorical purpose.

## The Eagle:

There’s good reason why some people are called “eagle eyed”. Eagles are known for their superior vision and their ability to spot exactly what they are looking for, whatever they need, no matter how small. Eagles fly with courage and with strength, which is why they are such a popular symbol used for sports teams and even as our countries national animal. In Garudasana we imagine the Eagle and

allow ourselves to channel its strength, balance, and purpose driven gaze while executing the pose. Butera says, “The challenge of the Eagle Pose is twisting while balancing on one leg. This can be extremely difficult at first, but gradually we become more flexible and stronger. As we settle into the pose, our purpose



becomes clearer. The third eye chakra (the seat of sight and intuition) opens, improving vision. Just as the eagle can spot a mouse from thousands of feet away, Eagle Pose helps us to see what is important in life. Unfolding from the pose, our metaphorical winds spread, conveying a sense of lightness and a freedom from hindrances.”

#### The River:

A river is another beautiful image that can transform our yoga practice. Like our lives, the river is always moving. Sometimes the current might be fast while throwing itself aggressively in all directions, or the current might be slow, taking its time and enjoying the calm. Regardless of the current’s state, we are reminded of its impermanence, whether fast or slow, good or bad, the condition of the current will change at any given moment. Although we don’t have a pose in our asana arsenal called the river, we often use it to describe other parts of our practice. Sometimes we use it in our pranayama practice, visualizing our breath flowing in and out of us like the river. A vinyasa flow class is



usually structured to mirror the changing current of the river, from calm to swift then back to calm. The image of the river allows us to better understand the flow of our lives.

### The Lotus Flower:

It's very rare to go onto a yoga apparel website and not find a lotus flower on a t-shirt, a necklace, or a pair of pants. The lotus flower has become an iconic symbol in the yoga world, but why? Caron Bosler describes the lotus flower by saying, "The lotus flower grows from the bottom of streams and muddy ponds to rise above the water and bloom. It symbolically represents being fully grounded in



earth, yet aspiring towards the divine. At night the lotus flower closes, and sinks below the water, just to resurface again untouched the next day. The lotus flower is an iconic symbolism of beauty because it lives in the muddy waters yet

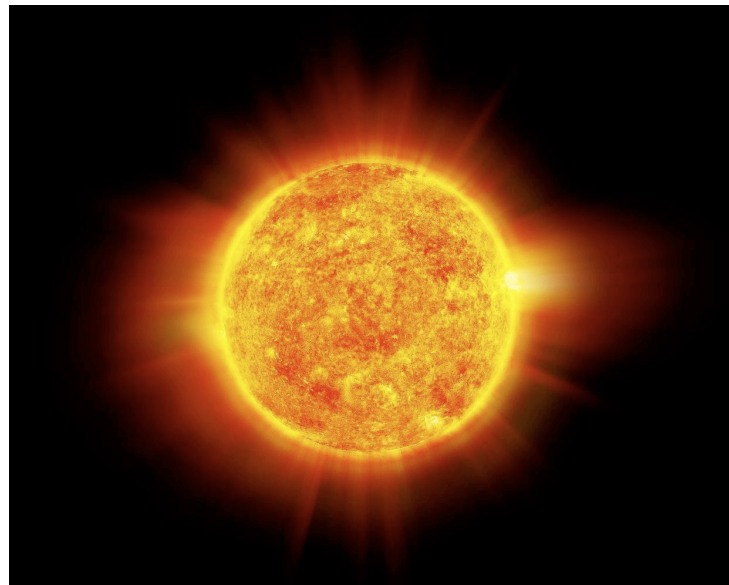
remains unsoiled." In yoga our journey is leading us towards the unraveling of our ego so that we may get to a place of peace. Like a lotus flower, we start closed, underwater, where we constantly feel the pressure of the water weight bearing down on us. The further we journey into our practice the more our flower begins to bloom, petal by petal, until we surface above the water, spread wide and our heart center, our true self, is finally visible as it reaches towards the sun. In Padmasana our legs create lotus petals as our hips blossom open and let all that light and energy flow into them. With every heart opener we are allowing our heart center to shine as we let everything that's holding us back just slowly slide off of us. A wonderful way to experience this blossoming in our asana practice is to start in Balasana and



on the inhale, begin to lift up, standing on your knees and reaching your chest and arms towards the sky. On the exhale come back down to Balasana. Keep doing that, matching breath movement with body movement and with the image of a blossoming lotus flower in your mind. The more you practice this mini vinyasa, focusing on the lotus flower, the movement turns into a moving meditation and the separation between you and the lotus flower no longer exist. You are the lotus flower and the lotus flower is you.

### The Sun:

Without the sun there would be no heat and without heat there would be constant cold and stillness in our lives. We need heat to motivate us, to purify us, and to change us. We see the sun, often referred to as Surya, in many areas of our yoga practice. For pranayama, we use Surya Bhedana, where we use our visnu mudra to inhale through our right nostril and exhale through our left



nostril. The right side of our body is considered the masculine side or the sun side and is associated with heat as well as our pingala nadi. We use this pranayama to heat up our bodies before the more vigorous, heat building part of our practice. In our asana practice we often do sun salutations, or surya namasakara, to build heat in our body through the repetition of poses, usually matching breath movement to body movement. In general, a very heat building practice is called a brahmana practice and it is used to build our energy. Like the yin and the yang, we use brahmana practices with people that live in a more cool, calm, and sometimes lazy place. Our goal is always to balance out our energies. Robert Butera talks about finding balance by saying, "Yoga helps us to harmonize their opposing energies so

that we can live a balanced life.” During a heat building practice, visualize a bright sun inside of you, resting in your belly or 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> chakra. Let the heat of the sun warm you from the inside-out. The harder you work, the stronger the sun glows and the hotter you feel. Let the sun be the fire that fuels your entire being.

The moon:

Ah, the moon. Who could deny the infinite beauty of the moon? Just like the sun, we use the moon, or Chandra, to cool down our practice and to bring a sense of calm to our body, mind, and spirit. Associated with the left side or feminine side of the body, we use Candra Bhedana to close the right side of the nose so that we can



inhale through the left nostril, then switch the mudra and exhale through the right nostril, bringing breathe to the left side of the body and energizing the Ida Nadi. The moon is associated with cycles, with the full moon and new moon being the more predominant parts of the cycle. It’s said that the

moon has both a conscious and subconscious effect on our minds and bodies. Tias Little talks further on this subject in his Yoga Journal article, *To The Moon*, “One theory is that because the body consists mainly of water, you are affected, like the ocean's tides, by the moon: On full-moon days the pull of the moon is so strong that your prana (life force) moves upward, leaving you feeling headstrong and liable to push yourself beyond your limits; on new-moon days, the pull of the moon is so diminished that you find yourself lacking motivation. The ultimate time to practice, then, is during the middle of the lunar cycle, when the moon is a half circle and your prana is balanced. You can observe for yourself if this is true. “ Often on full moon days, people choose either to not practice or to only participate in a restorative



class. If someone is looking for a little more movement out of their full moon practice, they can flow through a Langhana/cooling practice, incorporating some Candra Namaskaras or moon salutations into their sequence. Symbolically, the moon while representing the ever changing cycle of life, also represents seeing a light in a sea of darkness. The moon is reassuring and comforting in a place that might bring us fear. While meditation, imagine a full moon, hovering right over your head. Imagine the moon's beams shining down on you and find peace in that calming and protective light. Find comfort in its change and know that even when you can't see it, it's still there.

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