

Yoga Practice Designated for Women Coping with Breast Cancer by **Shira Nahaloni Gliksberg**

In the past two years I have been teaching yoga for women with breast cancer at all stages of the disease, both group and private sessions.

Group practice is usually suitable for women in the process of recovery, up to three years after treatment, and is also a kind of support group that embraces each recovering woman. The group class is small and intimate, and the participants converse with each other before or after class: suggestions come up, difficulties and reflections surface, tears are poured, relationships and friendships are established.

Individual practice changes and is adapted to the situation that each woman is faced with. Duration of the personal designated training is short, and it lasts from 40 minutes to an hour, compared to a regular yoga class that lasts about an hour and a half. In this way, even women who suffer from the cumulative effect of chemotherapy are able to enjoy the class. Usually, for private sessions, training is done at the home of the practitioner, due to the fact that she cannot collect enough emotional strength to go out, or feels physical exhaustion due to treatments.

While I was in the midst of my yoga teachers training course, I was diagnosed with cancer. During this period I experienced a big gap between my physical ability to that of the rest of the class. The long practice made me very tired. I was looking for a practice that would fit my needs and my new physical reality. I found myself developing a new Yoga practice that was a little different from that of my classmates'. I was searching for adaptations and new modifications for the postures and the familiar pose sequences, in order to place minimum weight on my hands. I found that I was breathing differently, and was developing great awareness to new places I did not know when I was healthy.

The practice that will be discussed here was born out of coping with the physical and mental difficulties of training when the body is sick.

A designated Yoga practice has been shown to greatly contribute to coping with the body while sick. I chose to focus here on breast cancer following my personal experience and the deepening and diving into this subject by myself and with my students.

Ayurveda advocates a holistic perspective. In the west we rarely look at the variety of aspects surrounding a sick individual. Yoga practice during illness provides a glimpse inward. By learning to conjure clear instructions to the organs through movement and observation, the individual can learn about the changes taking place in the body and the body's ability to contain these new circumstances.

In this article, I will attempt to examine this issue from several perspectives:

1. A general overview of what happens in the body of the woman coping with the disease and the various stages of treatment.
2. The psychological aspects of coping with the disease
3. Physical aspects and guidelines for a designated practice geared toward women coping with breast cancer.

Why practice yoga when dealing with breast cancer?

General Overview

Dealing with a serious illness generates a lack of control over the situation, over life, and sometimes also over the body we have known our entire lives. Consciously learning to direct one's attention, listening to the body and its organs, moving the limbs, strengthening them, causing the blood to flow – all these elements provide a sense of control, at least in part. The practice of yoga allows us to recruit the body, mind, consciousness, concentration and emotions to work together. Such training restores self-confidence, improves one's mood, and establishes a deeper understanding of the processes that women diagnosed with breast cancer undergo.

Women who find themselves on this path, overwhelming and foreign, do not tend to stop to listen inwardly to the body, or to create a quiet and relaxed place where they could listen to their bodies. In listening and conversing with the body, one can learn great things: to twist if the need to do so arises, to breathe when the need to do so arises, to stretch, and so on. These are all things the body asks for. The framework of a yoga class enables this delicate listening through instruction. Classes provide tools, so that each woman can learn to listen independently, and as a result, move in an optimal way that will ease her pain and strengthen the weak areas of her body.

Doctors, relatives, caregivers, therapists, friends and family constantly advise the patient on the many decisions that need to be made. Often, this overflow of information can be confusing to the patient and causes a loss of focus, a scattering of emotional strength, and a spreading thin of resources such as time, energy and finances, instead of creating an organized and systematic treatment plan she can stick to. Many times there is a sense of lack of control over the situation due to the multitude of voices and opinions which create noise and do not lead the patient to find what is best for her. During practice, the patient simultaneously copes with the difficulty of trying to handle her body as she used to, and at the same time experiencing the small and satisfying success of discovering "*one more thing that I can do*". The patient alone can know what is good for her, and thus the process of restoring the patient's complete control of herself and her situation is realized.

Moreover, coping with the disease produces a lot of pressure, and especially uncertainty. Chemotherapy affects the nervous system and often a sense of depression overwhelms the patient. The medications accompanying the treatment usually produce hot flashes. The cumulative effect of chemotherapy brings with it an

intense weakness and lack of clarity of thought. Changes in the inner ear often cause a sense of disequilibrium and multiple falls. During practice, we direct the attention to certain organs and concentrate on them. Such focus of attention over time develops awareness, and in my experience – creates a significant functional difference. By observing the current situation and working on a specific area of the body, this area comes to life, blood is pumped and the organ maintains its elasticity and vitality, even after trauma. For example: regular practice of breathing creates a calming of the nervous system; practice of balancing restores the sense of orientation in space and helps maintain balance and equilibrium which may have been affected during treatments. These practices, in turn, are carried with the woman “off the mat” into her daily life.

Another familiar phenomenon is tightness of the breast area after surgery, and as a result, the entire body over-protectively recoils inward, vulnerable and painful. Controlled breathing into the chest creates an expansion of the thorax and maintains the elasticity of the tissues. Many women report that "*all of a sudden they are breathing*". I do not know for certain if the reason is that beforehand there was no attention to breath, while due to directing the attention something has changed and a sense of "*Suddenly I breathe*" was created, or that the reason lies in the fact that through Pranayama practice an internal expansion of the chest area is created. Either way, those practicing yoga regularly can easily relate to the feeling of expansion of the respiratory tools following a powerful Pranayama practice. Will this result be considered physical? psychological? corporeal? There is no importance of the specific definition of the reasons why; the truth is discovered during class and speaks for itself.

A few words about the psychology of dealing with the disease

The loss of a bodily organ or part of it brings many changes: some are physical and are felt outwardly and some are emotional and are not externally visible. However, anyone who has experienced such a challenge is well acquainted with these changes. An imbalance in the way we hold the body and in posture is created as well as in the inner feeling – "*How do others see me*", "*Does everyone see what I feel?*" "*Do they see the asymmetry?*" Naturally, self-esteem also changes. Giving space and paying special attention to these new sensations allows a regaining of balance.

I am well aware of the difficulty of losing an intimate organ, not to mention an essential feminine organ such as a breast. Surgical intervention in an area that is both delicate and significant to one's identity necessarily brings quite a few psychological expressions. A woman's sexuality is often compromised, the nursing ability is impaired, and often it is not recommended for women who have had breast cancer to conceive. Moreover, coping with a serious illness, which in many cases might also be terminal, brings up many thoughts about death and how to deal with the notion, both by the woman herself and her immediate surroundings: family, spouses, children, parents and friends. All these aspects have often a real physical manifestation: a sense of pressure, un-relaxed or incomplete breathing, contraction of the chest area, back pain, aching abdomen, shoulders, neck, shoulder blades and so on.

A few words about the physical aspects

A surgery of resection, partial resection, conservation-surgery or removal of lymph nodes cause the muscles in the arms to atrophy, considerably impairing the range of motion in the arm. Furthermore, the chest area is withdrawn inward. This withdrawal leads to back and shoulder blade pain, and sometimes even creates a forward bending of the back. Women after breast conservation surgery report that the difference in weight of the reconstructed breast causes severe pain in the back and shoulders, as the body has to deal with a different weight than it used to carry. The designated yoga practice focuses on strengthening the arm and increasing the range of motion. A special emphasis is placed on the shoulders, proper posture and stability. A special attention is also directed towards the abdominal muscles, core muscles and leg muscles as a sturdy foundation and support system for the weakened parts of the body. Following a deeply physical yet gentle yoga practice one is infused with a feeling that the body is long and strong, alert and vital. This feeling also affects the emotional level regarding self-esteem and the acceptance of the body as it is now, creating foreseeable hope of further improvement.

The advantages of a designated practice over practice in a regular group

Weakness and poor physical condition during illness, especially following chemotherapy and radiation, create a sense of helplessness and a kind of a vicious circle: *"I have no strength to move – I rest; I'm not moving – I don't get stronger"*. This circuit preserves itself and creates despondency, heaviness and bitterness. Doctors advise their patients to take care of themselves and exercise, but it is very difficult to get out, get down to it, especially when you have to do it alone.

In yoga centers or in sports centers that offer yoga classes, the groups are usually large and include a diverse crowd of younger and older people, ranging in levels of ability. The teacher must deal with the spectrum of abilities, assuming everyone is healthy and able to perform all the different poses, but differing in flexibility and strength. Practice within such a group may cause the sick or recuperating woman feelings of failure. Moreover, if the woman wants to fight against her feeling of weakness, she may harm herself due to over strenuous work. Even the most basic yoga practice in non-specialized yoga groups requires placing weight on the hands, forward bends and the like. All these are very difficult for those coping with such an illness that affects the entire body so severely. In a designated yoga practice, attention is given to the range of motion of the arm, to moving the arm in all directions and to strengthening it by holding it against the force of gravity rather than by placing the body weight on the hand. Also, a sense of failure and incompatibility with the rest of the group is discouraging and affects the success of the practice. Adaptation is required; a special adjustment of the practice that is enabled only in a designated group.

In a specialized group, attention is given to the lymph node areas, and practitioners perform regular practice to stimulate blood flow and activate the lymphatic system. This practice can help prevent lymphedema, or swelling and edema in the arm.

A designated yoga practice corresponds one on one with the physical therapy recommended by the hospitals when they release patients after surgery. Many women have reported that they "*have no energy*" to do the physical therapy alone and they "*have no energy*" to go to the clinic. It is easier to get instructions and perform the practice in a guided manner.

At this point, it is crucial to mention that should women who have dealt or are dealing now with cancer choose to practice in a normal group, the role of the teacher is to meet their specific and unique needs and do it as discreetly as possible so the practitioner can feel part of the group, and not a feeble outsider. Therefore, I see a great importance in spreading this knowledge among yoga teachers to help them acquire the ability to meet these needs.

My experience in a designated practice according to the principles of Vijnana Yoga

The practice of Vijnana Yoga was created around seven principles: relaxing the body, quieting the mind, focusing through intent, rooting, connecting, expanding, elongation and widening, and awareness of breath. Naturally, in a regular practice, I try to practice with an awareness to these principles, and sometimes deliberately focus on one principle separately.

In Vijnana practice, we always talk about the connection between one organ to another. For example, one feels elongation when there is a strong sense of connection from the feet to the head. After undergoing multiple surgeries during my illness, I found it difficult to feel this connection. For me, every movement was arrested in my chest. Even while practicing Pranayama – Breathing could not flow through this impaired area. I tried to breathe Ujjayi – I tried to feel the line that goes from the groin along the back, but the line would stop midway. Always in the chest area. I had difficulty rooting and rising along this line, severed by trauma and pain. This went on for a long while. After some time, following a workshop with my teacher Noga, I happened to be engaged in working with the sides of the body. For a while I had been trying to elongate from the sides, from the armpits to the fingertips, with my hands raised upward. Suddenly, as I worked on this stretch, I realized something that has not been there for a long time: a connection was created from the bottom up, using a support mechanism from the surrounding areas. It bypassed the discomfort and the arms rose up without feeling any pain. The range of motion was surprising. Through experience and perseverance in this practice my upper body strengthened, and consequently, I felt a relief not only that my practice was regaining momentum, but that my chest area was slowly reopening. The area expanded, strengthened and elongated. And so it is until today – I remember this example and try to work around the vulnerable areas that radiate pain, blockages, inhibitions, and obstructions in a variety of methods.

Going all around – this is the principle that guides me in this work. Consequently, I find myself breaking postures apart, which allows me to perform more advanced poses with my students, such as Vasishta – a pose in which the weight is placed on the hand. By breaking up the pose in a different way, it is possible to work around the

injury and execute the pose in a way that disperses the weight amongst several organs, not just the compromised limb. In this way, the principles of the pose are preserved and the different areas strengthened. I would like to comment that I perform this specific pose with women who are six months or more after surgery, if transplantation was done. If a transplant was not performed, one can start after three months.

Before I present to you the pictures that illustrate the exercises, there are two important issues that need to be considered when we construct a designated practice for women during chemotherapy and radiation:

1. A poor physical condition and the effect of steroids that accompany chemotherapy make it very difficult to practice sitting as we are used to in a regular practice. I discovered that many women find it difficult to sit down, find it difficult to 'calm the mind' or 'to turn the gaze inward'. In many cases – a moment of quiet brings with it a wave of crying or constantly darting thoughts and general restlessness. In these situations, I tend to give more precise guidance during the sitting session. For example, paying attention to the length of breath and noticing if there is a fullness of breath; where is the breath situated? in the abdomen, in the chest and so on. I find it is important to employ these techniques and not give up on a “sitting”, since directing the attention in this way supports the practice, allowing an opening of the chest area that is usually tight, and makes it possible to fuel the body with fresh air.
2. Due to the difficulty to 'sit quietly', since concentration in Pranayama is not simple, I sometimes find it helpful to incorporate the breathing exercises in specific postures which lend themselves to a feeling of openness. A feeling that it is possible "*to stretch the scars a little*" and expand the chest area.

Examples of the integration of Breathing in the postures:

- a. Performing Nadi Shodhana Pranayama (lateral breathing) during twists. Allowing one side to fill up with air, holding the breath and searching for more extension range for the hand and then letting go with the exhale.
- b. Performing Kapalabhati breathing while working on the abdominal muscles lying on the back or sitting. For example, while practicing Navasana – if necessary using back support with a bolster.
- c. Practice the Vayus – the Vayus work on the nervous system, creating a sense of calm and stability. Here I have to make a note that the length of time required for practice of Vayus makes it difficult to achieve a sufficient practice with them. I sometimes break the practice down and use only one or two points such as Prana Vayu or Samana Vayu. In a group practicing for a long time or in women that find it easier to concentrate, one can get excellent results with this practice.

Below I will present a few recommended poses that serve as an example for a practice for women dealing with breast cancer. The explanations will be followed by demonstrating photos. The number under each photo indicates the order of carrying out each pose. The practice can also be found in the following link (explanations are in Hebrew): <http://www.breastcancerYoga.co.il/practice>

The principle linking these positions is finding a connection to the midline of the body and practicing around this line, while keeping balance.

Begin the practice lying on your back to relax the back and shoulders. Lie down with knees bent, feet on the mat. Breathe gently for a minute or two, and try to observe both sides of the body. Try to feel the differences between the two sides. Start to organize the body around the mid-line, which passes exactly between the front and back and between right and left. Slowly lengthen the breaths along the midline of the body.

Elongation: lying supine, lift your arms out in front of you and lengthen them slowly over your head to where the stitches, the arm and the chest allow (pictures 1–3) with fisted hands if possible, then bring the arms back to the starting point (pictures 1–3) – with inhalation raise your arms, and with exhalation lower them and bring them back to the sides of the body. Repeat this several times. Initially, the arm will not reach full extension. Repeating the motion allows an increase of rotation each time. If you can get your arms above your head, stretch your fingers fully. If you cannot reach all the way up, shift the arm to the side to where it can touch the floor, and then spread the fingers.

Try to direct the elongation so that it will be felt under the arms and along the sides of the body – from the waist, and not directly from the shoulder.

This exercise extends and allows a gradual increase of the range of motion of the arm, without resistance and without the need to bear weight or force on the working arm. Therefore it is suitable soon after surgery. The range of motion of the hand will grow with time and practice.

Elongating the arms lying and increasing range of motion



1

2

3

In a more advanced stage you should clench your hands into fists (picture 4, next page). You can raise both hands together, clenched, constantly keeping them correlated. The unimpaired arm can "convince" the challenged arm to reach further. It is likely that in the beginning you will feel that one gets "stuck." As long as you feel a slight stretch in the scarred area and no pain – continue. If you feel a strong stretch, stop at this point; with practice you could go further. Done at the beginning of the practice, this exercise allows us to know 'where we are' and what our boundaries of motion are. Over time, the area will warm up faster and with a broader range of motion. You can try to perform this exercise at the end of practice and notice if there is a difference.

Initially, begin with open palms. Later clench your hand and point the fists down as shown in Figure 4.



4

Twist in order to relax the arms after stretching.



5

Twist: (picture 5 above) while lying on the mat, shift both knees to the right while the hands are spread sideways. Breathe deeply along the left side to expand the rib cage with the inhalation, so that the back of the rib cage is pressed slightly against the mattress. Totally empty the air with exhalation. Repeat this about 10 times and change sides. You may feel a little stretching in the underarm and in the chest area of the opposite side towards which the knees are turned. This is a good gentle stretch that improves the range of motion of the hand. It doesn't matter on which side you start the twist. You need to pay attention to the feeling on each side of the curve: where it is pleasant, where unpleasant, what is stretched, and how far you can stretch in a way that doesn't cause discomfort.

Move to lie on one side, and with your hands assist yourself to transfer to a six point stance so that the hands, knees and feet are on the mat.

Cat pose: Expand the area between the shoulder blades. Fill it by rooting the palms of your hands and creating distance between the shoulder blades (1). With the exhale arch your back (2). With Inhalation straighten your back (3). Repeat this several times (4–6). You may feel a stretch in the underarm. This exercise widens the area of the shoulder blades and shoulder girdle. In this exercise, very little weight is placed on the hands as the body weight is divided between the hands, knees, and feet.

Cat Pose



1



2



3



4



5



6

Balancing: from the six point stance of the previous exercise, we will move to practice balancing. Bring the right foot forward close to the palm of the right hand (picture 1), if needed you can put a pillow under your left knee. Align around the midline of the body, spread your arms to the sides (picture 2) and turn the navel to the right; bring your left hand over your right thigh (3, 4) and take a few breaths. Return to a six point stance and then alternate to the other side. This exercise strengthens the balance that was damaged during chemotherapy and it promotes a balance between the two sides of the body. The twist massages internal organs such as the liver and kidneys, and improves blood circulation. This exercise also strengthens the legs. At the end of the exercise rest a little in child's pose or any position that allows rest, and then transfer to standing.

Balancing practice including strengthening the legs



1



2



3



4

Strengthening the arms and shoulder girdle while standing: Stand up and spread your arms out to the sides. Release your shoulders and try to extend the distance between the shoulder blades (1). Breathe a few deep breaths, and fill the rib cage with air until the chest rises and the shoulders roll slightly back (2). You may feel a difficulty in holding the hands to the sides – if so, breathe slowly and try to hold your arms against the force of gravity. Start rotating your palms to point up and continue until the palms face backwards and your elbows point forward (3). Return the palms (4) and rotate the arms in the opposite direction (5) until the palms face forward and the elbows backward (6). Accompany the movement of arms with the head, so that on one side of the turn the chin is facing up and on the other side it is facing down.

At the end of the exercise lean forward and release the arms, shoulders and head (7). This exercise uses the pull of gravity to strengthen the arms and increases the range of rotational movement of the arm.

Strengthening the arms and shoulder girdle standing



1



2



3



4



5



6

Forward bend and relaxation



Relaxation: Lie down on your back. You can twist gently from side to side to release built up tension (1, 2). The twist has to be soft. Try to rest yourself in the position gently. Then lie down relaxed for a few minutes. Breathe deeply through your nose and try to feel the air in your nostrils.

Twist



1



2

Summary

I feel a strong need to conclude by saying: I'm not claiming that the practice of yoga cures cancer. I do, however, strongly believe that yoga has the power to help many in coping with their illness. The practice focuses and gathers one's body and consciousness, providing a sense of control and agency.

Practice during this period allowed me to feel alive; I felt more vital and stronger than I felt on a daily basis after having been diagnosed and undergoing treatments., Most of all, the practice helped me come to terms with my frail self. This mindful practice welcomed a new feeling: this body that had betrayed me could also win. Taking small steps, with each pose, with every breath, I was winning. So, I kept drawing in another breath and continued to perform pose after pose until this training was born.

And here I stand today, a small woman with clean margins, a bit bruised but still a winner. Some people are tempted to abandon the practice of yoga when they feel unwell or when they feel that the burden of coping with the body or with life is too overwhelming. I challenge you, as teachers, to find a way to teach them to circumvent the pain and continue their practice. Find the practice that suits them and stick with it, and know that you will have helped them to do something good for themselves in a time of strife.

On that note, I would like to thank my teacher Noga Barkai from the bottom of my heart, who guided, oriented, and urged me to continue to come and practice despite the difficulty. I wasn't always successful. But when I was, the satisfaction was great, even if it seemed I did very little. I would like to especially thank her for convincing me to write these experiences down. Writing helped me concretize many of my experiences, which I can now reflect back on. I return to what I have written, and remember those words as I stand in front of women who are undergoing similar experiences today.

Lastly, I would like to extend a big thank you to Einat - my trusted colleague and a true friend who encouraged me all the way to class and back, supporting and listening to me. She is still there for me with her big heart.

Without them I wouldn't have done what I do today.

About the author

Shira Nahaloni lives in Tzur Hadassah with Uri and her two daughters Mai and Noa. She has a BA in Geography and a BA in General Studies from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A Vijnana Yoga practitioner since 2003, Shira graduated the Senior Yoga Teacher's training course directed by Noga Barkai–Ron, and continues until today to study with Orit Sen-Gupta. In 2007 she was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through the various stages of coping with the disease until recovery. Alongside regular classes she volunteered for two years in "Hadadi" – an Israeli NGO for the support of women coping with breast cancer, where she set up a designated yoga group for women diagnosed with breast cancer, and later continued with the group privately to provide ongoing support. In addition, Shira conducts private sessions in the homes of the practitioners with the firm belief that it is important to practice even when it is difficult to go out.

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