

EMBODYING ANIMAL & NATURE ENERGY in Yoga Practice

em·body: verb \im-'bā-dē\

- 1: to give a body to (a spirit): *incarnate*
- 2: to make concrete and perceptible
- 3: to cause to become a body or part of a body: *incorporate*
- 4: to represent in human or animal form: *personify*

MANY PEOPLE ARRIVE AT THE CHOICE OF DOING A YOGA PRACTICE WITH THE INTENT OF FEELING MORE CONNECTED TO SELF.

In time, a deep sense of knowing reveals that we are more connected to everything around us, including the deep energy and wisdom of nature. Once the eyes become open to this connection, we begin to pay attention to details and beautiful patterns reveal themselves. When examined closely, everything around us - from the budding flower to the falling snowflake to the beating human heart - contains something of a natural miracle. Life, when viewed from this perspective, is imbued with a sense of timeless wonder and our experience of it is transformed.

Whether we are aware of it or not, animal and nature energies are always around us. We have a huge impact on the earth and all of its resources, plants and creatures, and equally they have a huge influence on us. These influences can be understood in literal, spiritual and/or metaphysical terms, and when we become mindful of them as energy, it can help us to better understand our place within the greater world, and ultimately take us to a place where we are living in constant state of awareness of the divine interplay of nature, affirmed daily by the knowledge that life is sacred and beautiful.

For the yoga pose practitioner, tuning into the energy of nature offers the opportunity to embody certain qualities while practicing a Yoga pose. In doing so, a particular feeling related to an animal or archetype can be invoked. From an emotional perspective, we can bypass the defense of the ego, and in turn, deepen our understanding of the Higher Self. If the ultimate goal of Yoga is union, then embodying animal energy in practice is just one example of how we can experience that union through a pose practice.

All animals and structures in nature have special gifts and unique lessons that can enlighten and heal. When we are broken, lost or confused, we can seek the animal or natural entity that has the qualities we would like to embody and request them. By meditating on the energy or wisdom of a thing in a yoga practice, the experience of the pose is understood through a new perspective. As we invoke qualities to empower us during practice, we may also notice that our experience of that intention or quality spills over into daily life.

This pose practice offers animal and nature archetype poses from a variety of yoga traditions along with suggested qualities or feelings traditionally associated with them. Use your intuition

to choose one of the qualities to embody within each pose. The practice is designed as a sequence, but feel free to pick and choose the poses or animals that are calling out to you and practice them on their own. Conversely, if one of the qualities appeals to you but the pose does not, feel free to experiment with embodying that quality in a different pose. The idea is to connect to the animal quality/energy in a way that is accessible and meaningful to you.

Notice that there is an emphasis in this practice on movement within some of the poses and stillness within others. This is purposeful, as the energies of nature are in a continual state of flux and bringing a mixture of fluidity and stillness into practice creates a harmony within the body and mind. Whether you are moving in a pose or holding it, bring a meditative focus to the quality that you are embodying, open your heart and mind and connect to the power of the nature that already resides within!

Cat: *Independence, Protection, Magic, Mystery, Guardianship, Detachment, Sensuality, Balance, Wisdom, Recuperation, Reincarnation, Protection, Self-Confidence*

Practice 1: Lion's Pose

Note: *Straddle a block or bolster or tuck a blanket behind the thighs to alleviate pressure on the knees.*

From a table position, bring the buttocks back to meet the heels. Bring the hands to rest firmly on the thighs and spread out the hands into claws. Take a deep inhalation through the nose. For the exhalation, simultaneously open the mouth wide and stretch the tongue out and down towards the chin, cross the eyes and look up at the center of the forehead while making a forceful and exaggerated "Ha!" sound. Repeat 5-15 times.



Practice 2: Tiger Flow

Start from a table position with the hands under the shoulders and knees under the hips. With an inhalation lift the right leg up, arch the low back, open up the chest and throat and bring the gaze skyward. With the exhalation, draw the right knee into the chest and bring the forehead and knee towards meeting. Repeat the movement



5-10 times at a moderate pace, continuing to link movement and breath together. When finished, bring the right knee back underneath the hip, pick up the left leg and repeat the movement on the left side.

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Dog: Fidelity, Loyalty, Assistance, Intelligence, Obedience, Protection, Community, Cooperation, Resourcefulness, Communication, Sensory Perception

Practice: Downward Facing Dog

From a table position, walk the hands out in front of the shoulders and spread the fingers and palms wide. Gently lift the knees off the earth a couple of inches.



Keep the knees bent, press the chest back towards the thighs, draw the shoulder blades back and down the body and bring the belly button back towards the spine. Walk out the legs for a bit until the body is able to sink both heels down towards the earth. Breathe and hold 1-3 minutes. To release, drop the knees back into table or take a look between the hands and step the feet up to meet them, landing in a forward fold.

Elephant: Memory, Strength, Ancient Wisdom, Power, Connection to Earth, Prosperity



Practice: Elephant Tracks the Ants

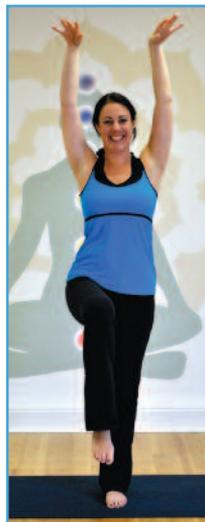
Start from a standing position, with the feet about mat distance apart. Inhale into a long back and exhale fold forward, hinging from the hips. Take a few breaths, and bend the knees if necessary to alleviate pressure in the low back or legs.

Let the head get heavy, the neck grow long and the arms dangle. When ready, start making figure eight or pendulum-like swaying movements with the torso. Allow the arms to come along for the ride, dragging the fingers on the earth if they are able to touch. Take the movements for 1-2 minutes before coming back to center and rounding up to standing

Crane: Solitude, Independence, Purity, Fluidity, Grace, Detachment

Practice: Flying Crane

From a standing position, bring the arms by the sides and the feet hip distance apart. With an inhalation lift the arms above the head, relax the hands. At the same time, bend the knee and lift the right foot off the ground as far as is comfortable and steady (note: some will barely lift the foot, others will bring the knee all the way up to hip height). With the exhalation, bring the arms down and right foot down, transferring the body weight over the left foot, lifting the right leg and the arms overhead. Continue moving side to side with the breath rhythm. Repeat 5-15 times, and notice how the movements mimic the silhouette of the crane in flight.



Lizard: Detachment from Ego, Regeneration, Facing Fear, Controlling Dreams, Moving in the Otherworld, Conservation, Agility



Practice: Lizard Lunge

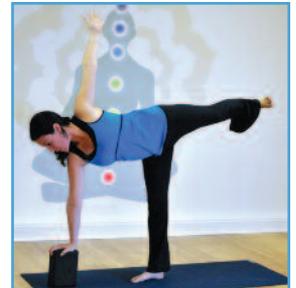
From a table position, step the right foot forward into a lunge. Walk the foot over to the right a couple of inches and bring the hands inside of the foot. With an exhalation, sink the pelvis forward and

down. Arms can stay long or the forearms can come down to the ground. Breathe and hold 1-3 minutes. Come out on an exhalation by taking the pelvis back and gently bringing the right knee back underneath the hip into table pose. Take a break in Child's Pose and repeat on the left side.

Moon: Receptivity, Femininity, Intuition, Illumination, Passivity, Influence, Cycles, Time, Fertility, Transition, Emotion, Perception, Progression, Mystery, Wonder, Discovery

Practice: Balancing Half Moon

Note: Practice with the back of the body against a wall to get a sense of the pose before trying it freestanding. A folding chair can replace the use of a block as a transitional support tool.



From a high lunge position with the left foot forward, inhale and lift the right leg to hip height. Bring a block underneath the left shoulder and hold on with both hands while stabilizing and firming into the left leg. Rotate the right hip open and stack it over the left. Flex the right foot and send energy out through the heel. Once stable, keep left arm/hand directly under the left shoulder and use the block for support underneath. Inhale the right arm skyward and rotate the torso to bring it in line with the hip. Focus on one point on the floor with the eyes to help with balance. Over time, experiment with taking the gaze skyward towards the extended arm. Hold for 3-10 breaths. Release on an exhalation by bringing the extended arm back to the block, rotating the right hip back towards the earth and stepping back into the lunge. Repeat on the other side.

Butterfly: Metamorphosis, Transformation, Cycle of Life



Practice: Floating Butterfly into Butterfly Forward Fold

From a seated position, bring the soles of the feet together and draw them in towards the groin. Bring some length into the spine and energy up through to the crown of the head. With the inhalation bring the knees up. With the exhalation bring the knees down. Repeat 5-10 times. When the movement is complete, with the knees down, fold forward with a long back on an exhalation. Find a natural stopping point in the fold and relax around it. Let the neck get long and the head get heavy. Give the body over to gravity and breathe. Hold for 1-3 minutes.

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Locust: *Travel, Progress, Faith, Overcoming Fear/Obstacles, Luck, Abundance, Trusting Instincts, Honoring Tradition*

Practice: Flying Locust

Start from a prone (belly down) position, with the feet mat distance apart the arms long by the sides. With the inhalation, lift the arms and legs bringing energy all the way into the fingers and toes. Breathe in the belly and explore side-to-side rolling like movements. Hold 1-2 minutes. At the end of the movement, bring the hands around, let one cheek rest and pause to notice the effects of the pose on the body.



Rabbit: *Magic, Good luck, Health, Alacrity, Agility, Fecundity, Abundance, Reproduction, Joy, Humility, Faithfulness, Conquering Fear, Selflessness*



Practice: Hare Pose

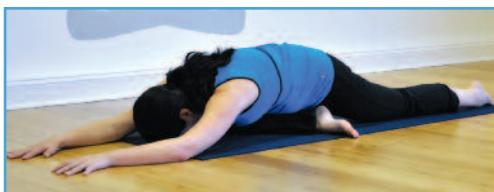
Note: Use a strap or tie to wrap around the heels and make up the difference in length if the hands cannot touch the feet.

From a table position, sit the buttocks back and reach the hands to grab onto the heels of both feet. With an inhalation, pick up the buttocks and lightly roll onto the forehead/crown of the head while rounding the spine. Stay grounded by firmly holding the heels and allowing the shoulders to relax with continued breath. Hold the pose for 5–10 breaths.

Pigeon: *Peace, Love, Gentleness, Messenger of Spirit, Communication, Maternity, Femininity, Prophecy*

Practice: Sleeping Pigeon

From a table position, slide the left knee in between the hands, finagle the left foot forward and lower the outer edge of the left hip and buttock to the earth. Take a look at the right leg behind you – there are 2 choices for the position of this leg – one is keep the knee bent, and the other is to extend it in order to bring the pelvis into a more of square position. Take a look at the left leg – there are 2 choices here as well – one is to keep the foot closer to the groin, and the other is take the foot away from the groin and create more of an L shape with the left leg. Experiment and choose the front/back leg combination that offers the best stretch for the IT band (outer edge of the left thigh, from the knee to buttock). With an exhalation, fold forward over the left leg and rest the forehead on the earth, or make a pillow for the forehead with stacked fists. Hold for 1-3 minutes and repeat on the right side.



Fish: *Fertility, Eternity, Creativity, Femininity, Good Luck, Happiness, Knowledge, Transformation*

Practice: Half Lord of the Fishes Pose

From seated, bring the legs long in front of the body. Bend the right knee and cross the right ankle over the left leg so that the right foot lands on the floor, outside of the left knee. Flex the left foot. With an inhalation, hug the knee with the left arm and lengthen through the spine. With an exhalation rotate the torso to the right, then the neck and head. Look over the right shoulder and take the gaze to the upper right corners of the eyes. Bring right hand behind the back, palm or fingertips to the ground, and the arm mirroring the spine. To gain more leverage to support the twist, place the left arm or elbow outside the right knee. Hold for 1-2 minutes while breathing deeply into the abdomen. When ready, slowly unwind the head, neck, shoulders and torso back to center. At center, straighten out the legs into staff pose. Bring the right leg long in front, flex the right foot, bend the left knee and cross the left leg over the right before twisting to the left.



Frog: *Luck, Purity, Renewal, Fertility, Healing, Metamorphosis, Transitions, Dreaming*

Practice: Wall Frog

Bring the narrow end of a yoga mat to a clutter free piece of wall space. With the arms behind the torso for support and the knees bent to the side, bring the buttocks about 12 inches away from the wall. Swing the legs around to face the wall and lower the torso into a reclined position. Bring the feet to the wall and rotate the hips, knees and feet out into a wide squat-like stance. If the position is too intense, hands can support the stretch by coming underneath the thighs. For more intensity, bring the hands to the inner thighs and encourage the rotation into the groin stretch, explore widening out the stance of the feet or bringing the buttocks closer to the wall. Hold for 1-3 minutes.



Bee: *Reincarnation, Communication, Concentration, Prosperity, Community, Celebration, Organization, Sweetness of Truth*

Practice: Bumble Bee Breath

Sit in a comfortable meditative seat. Bring some lift into the spine, relax the shoulders, soften the muscles of the face and bring the teeth slightly apart so that the jaw relaxes. Keep the lips together. Cover the ears with the thumbs and the eyes with the fingers, taking the elbows out to the sides. With an inhalation, slightly narrow the throat and listen to the sound of the breath as it enters the body. With the exhalation, breathe out slowly while making a long, low humming sound. With practice, both the inhalation and exhalation become long and smooth. Repeat 5-15 times. Then sit in silence for a couple of minutes to notice the after effects of practice. ▲

