

Soothing Waters of Aqua Yoga

By White Crow Yoga

Enrolling in a land-based yoga class can be intimidating for some students. They may have seen photos of yogis in postures that are unrealistic for most of us, or they have exercise barriers that limit their mobility on the land. The good news is that most everyone can still enjoy the benefits of yoga by practicing aqua yoga.

Benefits of Aqua Yoga

Regular yoga practice leads to an increase in balance, flexibility, and strength. Yoga has been reported to decrease depression, fatigue, heart rate, high blood pressure, and stress, as well as lowering the risk of succumbing to the diseases that accompany these symptoms. Many individuals who practice yoga claim that they engage in fewer addictive behaviors, experience mood improvement, have more confidence and a more positive outlook on life, and sleep much better. Additionally, long-time practitioners report a deeper spiritual connection and fewer emotional imbalances. Fortunately, aqua yoga provides the same benefits as a land-based practice.

Why Practice Yoga in the Water?

Aqua yoga involves many of the same movements and principles as a land-based practice, but adapts them to an aquatic environment to create a relaxing experience that is accessible to a wider population. As those of us who regularly exercise or play in the water know, water is naturally soothing, creating a sense of unparalleled tranquility. This creates the perfect environment to reap aqua yoga benefits:

- *Creates a beneficial cycle between the body, the emotions, and the mind*
- *May improve range of motion 30% more than land-based movements*
- *Builds strength and tones the body*
- *Relieves tension and renews energy*
- *Improves lung capacity – possibly more than a land-based class due to water pressure*
- *Fosters a serene feeling that translates to a more positive meditative experience*
- *Creates a safe environment for those with balance issues*
- *Allows those with joint issues, those who are unable to stand on the land and those who have difficulty getting up and down from the floor to participate in yoga*
- *Enables those with injuries and chronic conditions to practice yoga*

Even though the water makes yoga more accessible and reduces pressure on the joints, it can also create more challenges. The reasons are clear when we apply known water principles to our yoga practice.

Basic Water Principles and Properties

Just as we need to understand water principles and properties for our aqua aerobics classes, we need to consider how yoga poses may be impacted by water properties.

Buoyancy – the upward vertical force that we experience when we are in the water. The more buoyant a human body is, the greater the tendency for it to float. Buoyancy relieves the pressure on our joints, making aqua yoga more accessible than a land-based practice to students with joint issues. At the same time, buoyancy can create a great challenge in an aqua yoga practice because we must truly engage our legs and feet, keeping our weight evenly distributed to all four corners of the feet. This engagement of the lower leg muscles,

lifting up through the arches of the feet and keeping our weight evenly distributed is called pada bandha or foot lock in yoga, and the water will “keep us honest” with our foot lock. Even more so than on the land, if we don’t activate pada bandha we will not feel engaged or steady in the pose. Land-based yogis who come to an aqua yoga class often find a new experience with foot lock by practicing in the water.

Try it: To find pada bandha, stand tall with a neutral spine and evenly distribute the weight to all four corners of the feet. Lift the 10 toes and notice the muscle engagement in the lower leg. Gently firm the quads. Lower the toes, but leave the leg muscles activated.



Drag and resistance – as we move our arms and legs through the water, resistance pushes back on them. When performing standing yoga postures, we should engage mula bandha, which is “root lock” and uddiyana bandha, which is “core lock”. Think of mula bandha as a gentle lifting up through the perineum and uddiyana bandha as a firming of the core muscles. Just as with pada bandha, we may skimp on our root and core locks on the land, but an aqua yoga practice encourages us to engage our locks in order to feel grounded in our postures and maintain our upright stance. We must create dynamic tension to maintain balance and avoid the water’s pull so we don’t fall over or sway to and fro. Also, transitioning from pose to pose in the water provides us with a challenge as our bodies work against drag and resistance.

It is interesting to see a student transition from a land-based yoga class into an aqua yoga class. Often, a yogi will find that they thought aqua yoga would be “too easy” only to find that in many ways it is more challenging. Students find they must truly engage their bandhas in the water to stay upright. Balance is challenging in a completely different way, but one that is accessible to students who may not be able to balance well on the land.

Try it: To find mula bandha, stand tall with a neutral spine and engage pada bandha. Focus on the perineum and gently lift up, toward the core. For women, this will be similar to a gentle Kegel exercise. To find uddiyana bandha, stand tall with neutral spine and engage pada bandha and mula bandha. Gently firm the core at an intensity level that can be maintained throughout the practice.

Viscosity – refers to the friction that occurs between gas or liquid molecules. This is what makes lifting our arms palm up to shoulder height while submerged in water more difficult to perform than when we are standing on dry land. Likewise, viscosity adds an element of work when moving our bodies from one posture to the next in aqua yoga. As much emphasis should be put on keeping our form as we transition between poses as on maintaining proper alignment while holding a pose.

Hydrostatic Pressure – pressure that water exerts on our bodies is known as “*hydrostatic pressure.*” While it improves lung capacity by adding workload to the diaphragm, it is also comforting and gives us a feeling of being cradled, making aqua yoga very soothing. Many yogis find they can find a deeper meditative experience in the water.

Importance of Breathing

One of the most important elements of yoga is breathing or what yogis call pranayama. The benefits of pranayama range from physical to emotional. Learning to control the breath helps us control our emotions, which is the first step to being more in control of our lives. How many times have you heard a person tell someone to “*take a deep breath*” when they are trying to get them to calm down? This is due to the fact that deep breathing is extremely calming because it invokes the parasympathetic nervous system, causing a relaxation response.

A complete yoga practice should always include specific pranayama practices. When we breathe deeply while standing in the water, the diaphragm is required to overcome strong water pressure, which translates into strength training for the diaphragm and abdominal muscles.

Try It: An easy pranayama practice is Equal Ratio Breath. Inhale deeply and slowly through the nose, counting as you breathe in, trying to reach a count of four. Exhale slowly through the nose to a count of four. The amount of time it takes to inhale should be equal to the amount of time it takes to exhale. If this doesn’t cause any discomfort, try increasing to a count of six or eight, using only nasal breathing to retain body heat. Focus on the rise and fall of the belly during the inhale and exhale, blocking out all other thoughts.



Incorporating Aqua Yoga

While offering a 30 or 45 minute aqua yoga class is optimal, that’s not the only way to offer aqua yoga. Postures can easily be incorporated into other class formats. Learn a few moves and try replacing your regular stretch routine with a few yoga poses and some deep breathing, followed up with a few moments of visualization or meditation in Shavasana.

Getting Started with Tadasana, Mountain Pose: The first step to successfully engaging in standing postures is to master pada bandha, mula bandha and uddiyana bandha. Stand tall with a neutral spine with the feet hip width apart and engage the bandhas. Turn the palms toward the front, as in anatomical position. Core stability starts with the feet, and this lesson can be taught by getting students to engage their bandhas and asking them to release pada bandhas. Ask, "What just happened to your core?" and they will tell you that it released, too!

Finishing with Shavasana, Corpse Pose: Support the body, head and neck with flotation devices (such as noodles) and allow the body to simply float while focusing on the breath.



Enjoy and Namaste!