

DOGA:

Yoga for
dogs and
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Introduction

Doga, the yoga practice adapted to include interactive yoga postures with dogs, isn't as quirky and unseemly as one might first think. After all, Americans already work with, jog, hike and swim with their dogs, so why not introduce them to yoga practice with us?

Yoga practice and dog ownership are both immensely popular in America, and growing. More than 20 million North Americans practice yoga (Yoga Journal, 2008), and some 77.5 million have dogs (Humane Society of America, 2009).

Besides their sheer numbers, dog owners and yoga lovers have quite a few other things in common: Most obviously, both groups seek exercise, yoga enthusiasts for themselves, and dog-owners for their pets and themselves. Both groups are likely to honor the principle of kindness, the value of connection (person to person and canine to human), and seek wellness, better health, freedom from stress, relaxation, and better sleep (dogs are already masters at these last two). And there's this to consider: As Americans continue the trend toward obesity, so do our pets – especially our dogs. A recent survey indicated that 40% of America's pet population is overweight (National Veterinary Society, Sept.

2009). The number is about the same for humans. So, the more ways we (and our dogs) have to exercise, the better. As the saying goes, “If your dog is overweight, YOU are not getting enough exercise!”

A brief history of Doga

Suzi Teitelman, Director of Yoga for Crunch Fitness, New York City, New York, was the first to coin the term “Doga” in 2003. She experimented with sharing her yoga practice with her black cocker spaniel, who frequently joined her on her yoga mat. Teitelman reports, “When I began actively sharing my yoga practice with my dog, it seemed so natural and we fit perfectly together... it was a natural extension of my love for my dog.” (2009 interview, [www.pampered puppy](http://www.pamperedpuppy.com)). Her next step was to bring other dog owner/yoga practitioners into her yoga studio together with their dogs to practice. Word spread and the concept of Doga took off throughout the east and west coasts, and is beginning to gain interest here in the Midwest, as well. Teitelman has since published a book and several videos on the subject. “Doga is all about enjoyment, smiles and happiness,” she says. “No wonder it’s catching on.”

Although there is no research available (yet), Teitelman has noted that dogs that practice Doga sleep deeper and may be more flexible than their non-practicing counterparts. She believes the very reasons we humans gravitate towards yoga – to release stress, stretch muscles and elevate energy levels, can hold the same benefits for our dogs. Of course, Doga practice is a terrific way for dogs to

get one-on-one attention with their owners, and what dog doesn't love that? Research *has* been done about the dog-owner bond and the deep connection between some dogs and their owners. Because dogs have been bred for tens of thousands of years to respond and relate to human feelings, body language, emotions, and behavior, the potential for mindful connection is absolutely there to nurture, support and deepen (Dr. Matthew Breen, Human-Canine Connection, North Carolina State University, Sept. 2009)

“Those of us who live with dogs know that they are continuously picking up signals. A signal can be a bodily motion and it can be an inner movement, a change in the energy of the inner world. It is usually both. The thought of going for a walk shifts your energy a little, and you move slightly in your chair. Your dog notices both changes and is instantly alert. All of our perceptual systems, the human and the canine, are picking up changes in the surrounding world, and when those changes are meaningful in some way they become signals.

As you and your dog tune into each other, you create a relational space between you. One of you changes, and the other responds by changing also. This attunement to each other is a perceptual process, like vision, hearing, smell and touch. Within the relational space you are connected to your dog, and you change as he changes.” (Dr. Margot Lasher, 2005)

Eight Limbs of Yoga: 4 (furry) Limbs of Doga

The Ashtanga Yoga tradition of complete body-mind-spirit practice is taught through the “8 limbs” of yoga. I have found 4 “limbs” that can be highlighted in

Doga:

NIYAMA – Dog lovers frequently remark about being in tune with their dog’s emotions (and vice versa), which can be found in the Niyama practice of observance and self-study (Swadhyaya). Another Niyama dogs have a natural gift for is Santosha, or contentment. Dogs can provide a valuable model for humans in being free from judgment (another Niyama, Aparigraha.) They don’t care about the precision of your yoga form, they are simply happy “to be” – and -- be on the mat with you.

PRATYAHARA - Dogs are also naturally, acutely “in the moment” and eager for connection – something they can help *us* learn from *them*. A meditative study or connection with one’s dog could be a part of Pratyahara in the turning inward and connecting to the soul. Through frequent and intense “connection” with one’s dog through mindful Dhyana meditation (the 7th Limb), it may also be possible to achieve Samadhi (profound, absorbed meditation where the subject and object become one) with a much-loved dog companion.

PRANAYAMA - The 4th Limb of Yoga, or breath control, can also be shared in a Doga practice. Dogs are natural *Ujjayi* breathers. They take in full belly breaths, and breathe audibly through their noses, and through their mouths when they pant, naturally performing a breathing style close to “Sitali” or cooling breath.

ASANA - Lastly, there are the Asana yoga postures, the 3rd Limb of Yoga. Some Doga asanas are passive, i.e., your dog lying beside you as the human partner assumes a posture. There are other postures where dogs can participate directly, and still others where the dog can act as a counter weight or “stability partner.” The following pages will take you through a Doga practice, beginning with introduction and socialization, followed by a light, soothing dog massage to help your dog relax and become in tune with your energy. This is followed by sun salutations, and several dog-centric poses whereby human-canine partners with wide-ranging physical abilities can participate and enjoy their Doga practice together.

Asanas for Dogis and Yogis

Before class begins, let your dog shed some pent up energy (this is especially important with young, nervous or high strung dogs) with some exercise and a chance to relieve himself. Doga class can be conducted inside or out – just bring a blanket for your dog and a yoga mat or blanket for yourself.

1. Socialization: We begin with a few minutes to sniff and meet & greet – so your dog becomes familiar with other dogs and his surroundings. Or not. Less social dogs (and masters) may want to sit on their mat and enjoy alone time together.
2. Sit and Be: Music begins. Enhance your dog-person bond by tuning in. Breathe & relax; make a connection in the here and now; center and ground with and through your dog with slow, gentle, calming massage. Consider your

dog's physical preferences – where s/he wants to be touched which parts are sensitive. Your dog will respond to your energy level – long smooth strokes to the flank are soothing. Head, ears, neck, belly, and lower back massages are enjoyed by many dogs.

3. Opening OM: Gently coax your dog into your lap – or for larger breeds, in front of you while you are seated in sukhasana – seated pose. With your hands in prayer position, we chant 3 Oms, inviting dogs to participate in this life-affirming chant of all beings, all life. We offer a blessing for the health & long life for our dogs, and to allow us to be open to learn from their wisdom to learn to *live in the moment!*
4. Sun Salutation: With your dog relaxed and in front of you in a “down,” we stand in tadasana –standing mountain pose -- and reach up for a stretch, breathing in. Then standing side stretch to the right, upward salute, then left. Then bend at the hips and reach down to your dog, giving him a smooth, firm stroke down both flanks. Good dog! Then extend the arms out and upward, reaching back up, and repeat 3 times.
5. Downward Doga: Stand behind your dog (dog faces forward in a sit) and gently lift your dog's hind end up with your arms as you bend forward at the hips over him. Make sure your dog trusts you – so you can lift and stretch his legs back toward your hips (dog will be balancing on his front two limbs) as you lean forward, stretch your lower back, pull in your stomach and allow your lower back to arch slightly. Hold for several breaths, then release posture gently.

6. Seated Stretch: Be seated with your legs straight out in front of you and your dog between your legs. Gently lean forward, keeping your thighs firmly planted on the ground as you reach out to stretch your dog's front legs.... Next, his back legs. Now gently massage his spine, one vertebra at a time, until you reach just above his tail. Give this area a nice scratch or a massage, whichever your dog seems to like best. You may want to try a gentle tail stretch –if your dog's tail is not overly sensitive.
7. Airplane: Place your small to medium size dog on your shins as you lay down on your back. Gently raise your legs up into the air in an “airplane” as you tighten your core (abdominals). Keep your knees slightly bent. Repeat this 5 times for a good ab workout. Larger dogs can be placed under your lifted legs as you do this workout.
8. Bridge Pose: A natural extension to “airplane,” now place your small to mid-size dog on your stomach as you lay down on your back. Dog's head should be facing your knees, rather than your face. Gently support your dog's weight as you shift your shoulder blades back, pull in your stomach muscles, and lift your body up into bridge with your thighs. Move down and back up into this pose 3 times.
9. Triangle to Canine Warrior: Stand with feet apart, right foot facing forward, left foot back at a 90 degree angle, legs straight. Seat your dog beside and slightly in front of your right leg. Shift and lean towards the right into Triangle pose, using your dog to steady you with your extended right arm. Move into Side Angle pose, resting your right arm on your right thigh, your hand

cradling your dog's neck or top of his head as your left arm stretches above your head. Breathe and hold, then move into Warrior II, both arms extended out, palms down. Relax. Reverse positions (including your dog) and repeat on left side.

10. Tree Pose: Stand upright in Tadasana. Have your dog sit just in front of your left leg. Arms in prayer pose. Breathe in. Begin to bend and raise your left leg to the side; place your left foot on the inside of your right thigh or calf, whichever feels best. Steady yourself with the help of your dog – using your left hand to reach down to your dog's head for light support. Raise your right hand upward over your head and stretch. Hold pose for 15 seconds. Relax. Praise your dog and repeat on right side.

11. Downward Dog into Child's Pose: Have your dog lay down in front of you as you stand. Come into downward dog with your arms reaching just over your dog and placed firmly on the ground. Stretch and breathe into the pose. Then bend your knees down and come into rabbit pose with your dog in the hollow under your stomach. Breathe, then extend and rest your arms over your dog to come into child's pose. Lightly embrace or connect with your dog with your arms.

12. Doga Hero Pose: Sit upright on your knees with a firm straight spine. Your dog is to your side in the down position. Lean over your dog and help him onto his back. Gently massage his belly to help him relax. Begin to rotate his upper half (chest and front legs) gently to the right while manipulating his lower half gently toward the left. Allow your dog to be your guide on what is

comfortable for him. Relax and come back to the center. Rotate gently on reverse side.

13. Doga Hug: Lay on your back next to your dog. Lift and bend your knees up over your body, and twist your legs to the right, next to your dog. Hug your right arm around your dog while extending your left arm, and looking left, stretching your neck and torso. Breathe into the pose and relax, then reverse the pose, twisting your body away from your dog. Stretch your right arm out and look right, visually connecting with your dog. Breathe into the pose. Release and curve your entire body around your dog, giving him a full loving embrace.

14. Na-mutt-stay: Go into Sukhasana (seated pose) facing your dog and bring your hands together for a Na-mutt-stay: *The divine spirit in me sees and honors the divine and magnificent spirit in all the creatures of this world.* Thank your dog for his love and gentleness, and send peace and blessings to all the dogs in the world; homeless, wild, young and old, strong and weak.

Dogs have it right: BARK LESS, WAG MORE!

By:

Lauren Windle

Peace through Yoga Teacher Training

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