

## **NAF Conference 2009 – Wheelchair Yoga with Ralph Miller**

**Wheelchair Yoga** is a practice from India which embraces each individual as unique and beautiful. Consequently, each exercise (called a Yoga pose) is an expression of the individual. Therefore, just as no two people are the same, no two poses are the same. When performing Yoga in a wheelchair, each individual should work toward expressing the pose to his or her fullest capability while honoring his or her limitations.

### **Benefits of wheelchair Yoga include include:**

1. improved flexibility
2. increased strength
3. greater lung capacity
4. reduced levels of stress, tension and anxiety
5. improved mental clarity and focus
6. improved sense of well being
7. increased feelings of connection, less isolation
8. more restful sleep

### **Precautions**

When practicing wheelchair Yoga, follow these precautions:

1. Consult with a doctor before beginning this or any fitness program
2. When possible, perform Yoga poses with a partner or caregiver present
3. Stretch only to the point where you experience a mild tension, never pain
4. Continue to breathe normally as you hold each stretch

### **Breathing**

Breathing fully during each pose is the most important part of Yoga. As you breathe, breathe into your lower belly, and take as full and deep of a breath as you can. As you exhale, exhale long and sustain. Allow the rhythm of your breath to be steady and slow. This may take time and practice.

### **Wheelchair Poses**

The following are Yoga poses we will perform in a wheelchair.

### Cat Pose (back stretch)



1. Grip your chair or place your hands on your thighs
2. Exhale as you round your upper body forward, dropping your chin toward your chest, arching your spine like a cat
3. Hold in this position for a few deep breaths



### Cat Pose (alternate 1)

1. Interlace your fingers
2. Inhale as you lift your arms up to to the level of your heart
3. Exhale as you round your upper body forward, dropping your chin toward your chest
4. Hold in this position for a few deep breaths

### Cow Pose (front of body-opener)



1. Place your hands on your thighs or hold your chair
2. Inhale as you expand through the front of your chest, lifting your head toward the ceiling and gently arching your back
3. Hold the pose as you continue to breathe for a few deep breaths



### Cow Pose (Alternate 1)

1. Place your arms out to each the side, as far back as they will go comfortably and a little lower than shoulder height
2. Inhale as you expand through the front of your chest, lifting your head toward the ceiling and gently arching your back
3. Hold the pose as you continue to breathe for a few deep breaths

## Side Stretch (obliques and lats)



1. Inhale and lift one arm up over your head, bring your other arm to your hip, or on your arm rest for support
2. Exhale your body to the opposite side
3. Hold the pose for 3-5 breaths as you continue to breathe deeply
4. Inhale come back to center and switch sides

\*Caution: if you have rods, refrain from going too deeply into this pose, or you may choose to avoid this stretch altogether. If in doubt, consult your physician.

## Twist (back)



1. Inhale lengthen through your spine. Bring your right hand across to your left leg and your left arm on your arm rest for support
2. Exhale twist to look over your left shoulder
3. Hold for 3-5 breaths
4. Gently release and switch to the other side

### Eagle Pose (back and shoulder stretch)



1. Inhale and lift your arms
2. Exhale and cross your arms at the elbows so your hands are back-to-back
3. Hold in this position as you continue to breathe for 20-30 seconds

### Eagle Pose (advanced)

1. Inhale and lift your arms
2. Exhale and cross your arms at the elbows and rotate your hands so they are palm-to-palm
3. Hold in this position as you continue to breathe for 20-30 seconds

Forward Bend (low back, hips and and hamstrings)



1. Inhale, lengthen through your spine
2. Exhale, bend forward from your waist placing your hands on your wheelchair for support
3. Hold for 3-5 breaths. Continue breathing deeply as you hold the stretch

Forward Bend (alternate 1)



1. Inhale, lengthen through your spine
2. Exhale, bend forward from your waist placing your hands on your wheelchair for support
3. Hold for 3-5 breaths. Continue breathing deeply as you hold the stretch

## Hip Stretch (hips)



1. Inhale, lift one leg and cross it over the other
2. If you want a deeper stretch and you have good trunk stability, exhale and lean forward from your hips
3. Continue to breathe as you hold the stretch for 3-5 breaths
4. Gently release your leg and move to stretch the other side

## Leg Stretch (hamstrings)



1. Inhale, lengthen through your spine
2. Exhale, lift your knee as high as it will go comfortably. Reach your hands around your shin or the back of your leg so you can support your leg as you stretch
3. Hold for 3-5 breaths. Continue breathing deeply as you hold the stretch
4. Gently come out of the stretch



## Leg Stretch (advanced)

1. Inhale, lengthen through your spine
2. Exhale, lift your leg as high as it will go comfortably. Grip your shin or the back of your leg and lift your leg onto the seat of your wheelchair. If this is too much of a stretch, return to the previous version of the stretch above
3. Hold for 3-5 breaths. Continue breathing deeply as you hold the stretch
4. Gently lower your leg back to its normal position

## **Resources for Wheelchair Yoga**

For more information on wheelchair Yoga, meditation and breathing techniques, visit [www.mayallbehappy.org/](http://www.mayallbehappy.org/)

For more information on Yoga and other activities for people with disabilities, visit the [The National Center on Physical Activity and Disability](#).

You can reach Ralph Miller with your questions at [magicinthedesert@yahoo.com](mailto:magicinthedesert@yahoo.com)