



## Lower Back Focused Yin Yoga Sequence

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Practicing Yin allows for the opportunity to compress and decompress the **spine. Compression is often considered negative, but that's not necessarily** the case; in fact, when done safely, such as in a Yin pose, it provides an appropriate and positive level of stress to the tissues. Yin offers a wonderful combination of compression (for building bone strength and health) and stretching (or decompression, which helps connective tissue move optimally).

The sequence below is designed to stretch the connective tissue surrounding the spine to gently stress the back in a beneficial way and create ease of movement. It is appropriate for those who have been given the nod to both flex and extend their spines. If you are currently **experiencing back pain and haven't had it checked out, consult a** healthcare professional to find out which movements are right for you.

### How to Approach a Yin Yoga Practice

The three principles of Yin are:

- 1) To benefit from the acupressure-like effects of the pose on the connective tissue by finding the sensation of stretch, not pain (i.e., coming to your edge, but not going beyond it).
- 2) To become still—no fidgeting! Becoming still applies to the mind as well, and the mind can benefit from the stillness of Yin. But be aware that deliberate movement to find your edge or move away from pain is not fidgeting and is absolutely appropriate.
- 3) To hold each pose for a time. Different poses have different recommended hold times, but the minimum for a lower-body focused pose **is usually three minutes. I've suggested specific hold times below, but** every body is different. It may feel appropriate for you to come out of a **pose earlier than I've recommended, or to stay for slightly longer.**

**I've also offered some counter-poses. But remember, Yin isn't a** race: Come out of each pose slowly and wait for the sensations to wash over your body. Then pause in this neutral space before moving into a brief counter-pose, which is held for less time and will generally be more active, or yang-like.

This sequence takes about an hour, but can be trimmed or extended slightly—just use your *yin* instincts.

## The Sequence

1. Breathing and meditation: Five minutes.

Count how long your inhale takes, and then match your exhale to it. Focus on this equal breath to assist in making the inward transition from the busy, hectic outside world, to the slow, quiet perspective of Yin Yoga.

2. Butterfly: Five minutes.

Butterfly pose is similar to *baddha konasana* (bound angle pose), but the feet are farther away from the pelvis so that the legs form a diamond shape. You can place blocks under the thighs for support if you like. **The goal is to stretch the spine, not the hips, so the emphasis isn't on trying to get the knees to the floor.** You might also find that sitting on a folded blanket assists in achieving an anterior pelvic tilt while you're upright. **Yogis who aren't reaching their edge in the pose can** place a yoga block between their thighs for increased abduction (which can increase the stretch in the hips and/or inner thighs).

Next, lengthen through the spine as you tilt the pelvis forward and down to fold toward the ground, and then allow the spine to round and the head to **drop. Yes, it's okay** for the head to drop in a Yin forward fold! In fact, it is considered desirable, as long as the neck/cervical spine can handle it. If you start to feel pressure in the head, **or pain in the neck, it's fine to lift your** head for a minute or more and then release it again, or to keep it lifted the entire time (perhaps resting it on a block or bolster). Placing the hands or arms on blocks can help if reaching the hands to the floor pushes you past your edge.



To come out of the pose, lift the torso and place the hands on the floor behind you with the fingers facing forward. Then lean back onto your hands, and straighten the legs one at a time.

The counterpose is windshield wiper. Bend the knees and place the soles of the feet on the floor, mat width apart. Drop both knees to the right, then back through the midline and over to the left. Continue for one minute.



3. Caterpillar: Eight minutes.

Caterpillar is

essentially *paschimottanasana* (seated forward fold). But in the Yin version, feet neither flex nor point. If the hamstrings protest, place a rolled blanket or blocks under bent knees. You can also elevate the hips by sitting on the edge of a bolster or folded blanket. Tilt your pelvis slightly forward and down, and then fold forward, letting the spine round and the head drop. You can place a bolster on the legs or a block under your forehead for support.

To come out of the pose, slowly lift the head and lengthen the spine. Bend the knees, and place the soles of the feet on the floor. Place the hands



behind you on the floor. Press into the hands to lift and lower the hips in a way that feels good after the decompression of the pose. This counter-pose, called hammock, can be done for one minute.



4. Sphinx and Seal: Three minutes each.

Sphinx is a pose of deep lumbar and sacral compression, which can strengthen the spinal muscles and bone in the area. From hammock pose, roll over onto your belly. Plant the forearms on the floor, with elbows under or slightly

in front of the shoulders and forearms parallel or hands clasped.



For less intensity, move the elbows farther forward, perhaps clasping opposite elbows and keeping your forearms parallel to the top of the mat.

You can also place a bolster under the chest, armpits, and upper arms for more support.

For greater intensity, keep your elbows under your shoulders, or even prop the forearms on a blanket. The feeling should be of mild, not jarring, compression in the low back. If it does feel jarring, try drawing the navel **gently in toward the spine. It's fine to engage the glutes, but that isn't the main focus of the pose.**



After two minutes, you can bend the knees and let the heels drop down toward the glutes, as this can help achieve compression in the low back.

After you release, stack the hands and rest the forehead on them for one minute.



To progress further, you can come back into sphinx and then proceed into seal, or you could continue with sphinx, perhaps with the bent-knee option as another way to deepen the compression. For seal pose, place the hands under the shoulders, turning them out so your fingers point toward the top corners

of the mat. Then straighten the arms, pushing down to lift yourself away from the mat. If this is too intense in the low back, try extending the arms wider and farther away from you, or return to sphinx. If the belly sags and causes discomfort in the low back, gently draw the navel in toward the spine. Hold for three minutes.



Release onto the belly, and turn your face to the right. Hands can be stacked under your head or resting just above, elbows out wide. Bend the right knee and slide it up toward the right armpit, releasing any tension in the low back. Hold for one minute, and then switch sides. Moving slowly, push back into Child's

Pose and hold for three minutes.

5. Saddle: Three minutes.

**From child's pose, rise into a high kneeling pose with knees at hip** width or wider, depending on your personal preference. Saddle is similar to *supta virasana* (reclined hero's pose). **Feet can be underneath you, which works the spine more, or if it's more comfortable, you can sit between the feet,** which targets the front of **the legs. It comes down to "yindividuality,"** as anatomy will dictate which variation works best.



If the ankles protest, place a blanket underneath them. If the knees are not happy, try placing a thin blanket or a folded strap behind the knees to alleviate pressure.



Slowly lower the back toward the floor, placing the hands behind you, fingers pointing toward the hips, to ease the descent. Stop wherever you need to—You can come down onto forearms, recline on a bolster, or release all the way to the floor. **It's fine if the knees lift or move closer or farther apart.** If the compression in the

lumbosacral vertebrae becomes too intense, return to a more upright position, or come out of the pose entirely.

To come out of the pose, engage the core as you make your way onto your forearms, then your hands, and return your torso to a vertical position.



Then, come onto all fours and move into forearm plank by stepping one leg back and then the other. In Yin, this is known as crocodile pose. Hold for one minute with the hips at the same height as the shoulders. Knees can be on or off the floor. Keep your core active.



6. Bananasana: Four minutes each side. From crocodile pose, lower onto the belly and roll onto the back, extending the legs completely. Reach the arms overhead to the floor. Grasp the left wrist with the right hand and draw the left arm over to the right side, laterally flexing the spine to the right. This is the top half of the banana. Then move your feet over to the right, forming the bottom half of the banana. Crossing the left foot over the right will deepen the stretch of the left side body and IT band, while crossing the right foot over the left will provide greater stability in the pose.

Return to a neutral position on the back and repeat on the second side. Then return to neutral again and hug your knees into the chest. Circle the knees in opposite directions for one minute.



7. Twisted Root: Four minutes each side. This reclining twist can help release tension in the back. Lying on your back, bend the knees and place the soles of the feet on the floor next to each other. Cross the left thigh over the right and drop both knees over to the right side.

Some students will be able to wrap the left foot behind the right calf, but this is not necessary. Using breath and focus (and a sandbag on the shoulder, if needed), melt the left shoulder into the floor. A sandbag can also be used on the left hip or upper outer thigh. A bolster or block can be placed under the left knee if it hovers.

After repeating twisted root on the second side, hug both knees into the chest for one minute. Rock side to side, back and forth, or any way that calls to you.



8. Savasana: Eight to 10 minutes. **After a Yin practice, it doesn't take the mind and body as long to relax in savasana.** Savasana can be just as long as the longest-held pose of the sequence—although a longer Savasana is certainly delicious.

Come out of savasana slowly and take time to notice and appreciate any differences in your body. Throughout the week, balance your Yin practice with more yang-like energetic and muscular movements.

*Be Gentle... Be Kind...*

*Breathe...*

