

JAPA™: Joint Activation Practice for All

*Based on Pawanmuktasana Classical Series as taught by Swami Satyananda Saraswati**

This practice gently moves the major joints of the body through a comfortable range of motion while activating major muscle groups for support and stability-- using awareness and breath support-- as a foundational framework for a physical movement practice with profound and subtle benefits. Although Pawanmuktasana works the physical body, it is also a mental, emotional, and spiritual practice.

Systematically moving the joints helps to:+

- Prevent injury: According to research, sprains and strains are the top way injuries happen in yoga (Cramer, 2013)
- Increase circulation: Increasing the circulation of blood and lymph can help heal injuries and keep your joints and tissues healthy.
 - o According to yoga philosophy, it also helps you move your prana or vital life-force energy.
- Improve body awareness: By improving your body awareness (proprioception and interoception) you can:
 - o improve your posture, balance, and even relieve pain.
- Relieve joint pain: Gentle joint movements and strengthening can help with joint pain and can be beneficial for:
 - o arthritis (both osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis)
 - o fibromyalgia
 - o lupus and more!

+modified from Ann Swanson Wellness

Directions for teaching JAPA:

1. Always begin in a resting position to cultivate awareness and focus the mind in preparation for movement.
2. Movements are gentle invitations to explore the body in this moment without judgement or expectation in a non-competitive manner.

3. Adjust and accommodate as needed to stay comfortable in the body.
4. Start movements from a stable, grounded position—in a chair, on the floor, or standing.
5. Decide if the focus is on moving one side at a time or both sides together (where applicable.)
6. Start with smaller, slower expressions of movement before increasing range of motion or speed.
7. Repeat each movement 5-10 times at each joint—keeping other joints comfortable, stable and supportive.
8. Remember to use conscious breathing --Breathe in for one movement and out for the opposite movement with a natural pace.
9. Feel the energy moving through the body as each movement is performed.
10. Body should be relaxed and comfortable. Supporting muscles are engaged gently to assist in body stability– while focusing on conscious movement at the specific joint–and softening muscles that feel tense.
11. Observations: Notice which muscles are engaging to initiate, support, and control the movement in the focus joint. Is there involvement at other joints to assist in achieving a greater range of motion? Explore what muscles can engage to support and stabilize the other parts of the body in order to focus movement at the target area.
12. Direct all your attention on the body, breath, and movement.
13. Always pause to notice the effects after moving and reflect on what was observed.

Teaching Tips—

1. Use posture and safety cues to stay grounded, engage supporting muscles, and bring awareness to the body, breath, and mind.
2. Give permission to do or not do what feels right in the body. Goal is to stay focused, relaxed and comfortable with no strain or strong exertion.

3. For a more meditative/relaxing experience, consider closing the eyes while observing the movement of prana through the body.
4. Practice using a combination of appropriate movement terminology with movement explanations as cues/teaching tools.
5. Incorporate movement 'matching' to replicate a similar well-known movement pattern or guide students through a story with the movement "pretend you are...playing a piano."
6. Lead all the movements available at that specific joint. Be aware of the normal range of motion for each joint movement.
7. Notice where the movement is coming from—is there compensation at a different joint that is assisting or hindering the movement? Can the cues encourage stability of other joints to eliminate accessory movements or enhance focus to move targeted area?
8. If it looks as if a student is straining—
 - a. Remind them to stay comfortable-- and utilize posture/stabilizing muscles with breath to support movement
 - b. Choose to move only one side at a time
 - c. Reduce the range of motion for that joint movement
 - d. Remove the resistance of gravity from the movement or change body positioning
 - e. Eliminate the challenge of balance from the movement
 - f. Pause to rest and reflect, and/or allow the body stillness in savasana or preferred resting position
9. If a student could benefit from strengthening through a range of motion, consider—
 - a. Using both sides of the body simultaneously
 - b. Gradually increasing range of motion within normal limits
 - c. Adding the resistance of gravity to the movement or changing body positioning
 - d. Adding appropriate resistance using an external prop
 - e. Incorporating the use of PNF or other specific techniques

- f. Adding the challenge of balance to the movement
- 10. Share both the proven and felt benefits of the practice when guiding students.
- 11. Give practical examples of when/how students can replicate these movements during their day relevant to their needs while leading movements to encourage daily practice.

Guiding Student Awareness –

Focus Options:

1. The Physical Movement–*This practice induces peace, balance, and one-pointedness, which aids in restoring harmony to the body.*
Focus on:
 - a. the interaction between the various components of the body–
ie bones, joints, ligaments, muscles, etc
 - b. the movement in relation to other parts of the body
 - c. movement with mental counting of each completed round
 - d. movement with awareness of thoughts arising in the mind
 - e. movement with mantra
2. Integrated Breathing–*This practice results in movement becoming slower, which focuses the mind and enhances relaxation and awareness–affecting the physical and pranic bodies and vital organs.*
Focus on:
 - a. synchronization of individual movements with the breath
3. Movement of Prana–*This practice focuses the mind further– enhancing awareness, one-pointedness, and receptivity.*
Focus on:
 - a. drawing awareness to sensations arising from the focused breath and movement of the body

Historical Perspective

**The Pawanmuktasana Series is one of the most important groups of practices that has a profound effect on the human body and mind; and is thus a most useful tool for the yogic management of various disorders and maintenance of health.*

Pawanmuktasana is valuable for understanding the meaning of asana by developing awareness of the body's movements and the subtle effects they have at the various levels of being. It is very useful as a preparatory practice as it opens up all the major joints and relaxes the muscles of the body. The series may be practiced by anyone: beginner or advanced, young or elderly. It should never be ignored and treated casually just because the practices are simple, gentle and comfortable.

In Sanskrit, these practices are referred to as sukshma vyayama, which means 'subtle exercise'. The word pawan means 'wind' or 'prana'; mukta means 'release' and asana means 'pose'. Therefore, pawanmuktasana means a group of asanas that remove any blockages preventing the free flow of energy in the body and mind. (Yogis often describe the flow of prana as a flow of air – vayu in Sanskrit. In the Yoga tradition, it is believed that subtle energy called prana supports the physical dimension. We call this energy prana. It circulates in subtle channels called nadis.)

Sometimes, due to bad posture, disturbed bodily functions, psychological or emotional problems or an unbalanced lifestyle, the energy becomes blocked. This initially results in stiffness, muscular tension, lack of proper blood flow and minor functional defects. However, if these blockages become chronic, a limb, joint, or physical organ may malfunction, fail or become diseased. Regular practice of pawanmuktasana removes energy blockages from the body and prevents new ones from forming. In this way, it promotes total health, regulating and stabilizing the flow of energy throughout the body.

Asana, Pranayama, Mudra, Bandha~ Swami Satyananda Saraswati