

Zen YOGA

Images: Yulia Solf

Zen Yoga comes from Japan and is based upon movement work originating from Zen monasteries. Its roots stretch back two and a half millennia through China and India to the Buddha. In essence, the practice of Zen Yoga places importance upon correct physical alignment and the sequences of postures and movements free up our energy and develop non-judgmental present-moment awareness. More anciently called 'Zen taiso' or 'doin', the term Zen Yoga was first coined by a Japanese Zen practitioner and yoga exponent called Masahiro Oki during the 1960s. In 2007, a Zen Master called Daizan Skinner Roshi, brought Zen Yoga to the West.

Daizan Roshi is an Englishman who spent 20-odd years living in strict Zen temples in Japan and elsewhere, where he learned the art of Zen Yoga. He also trained with Pattabhi Jois (the founder of Ashtanga Yoga) in India before gaining dharma transmission (a custom whereby someone is established as a successor in an unbroken lineage of teachers) from his Zen predecessor, Shinzan Roshi.

Daizan Roshi is now based in London and is the founder of Zenways, an organisation promoting wellbeing, balance and enlightenment (satori). He has written two books and travels the world hosting Zen retreats and conducting teacher training courses in yoga, meditation and mindfulness.

*"When we bring together energy,
alignment and being in the present moment,
we move towards non-dual awareness."*

There are three major components of Zen Yoga. The first, explains Daizan Roshi, is correct physical alignment. "How you establish and relate to your bodily structure has a powerful effect upon how you are in the mind", he says. "What is also important is the sense of energy flow in the system. After all, we are composed of energy (called ki in Japanese) and this energy can be fostered, enhanced and also dispersed through various sequences. This in turn enhances our health, our emotions and our consciousness levels. The third component of Zen Yoga is the non-judgmental attention or mindfulness, known as 'nen' in Japanese. When we bring together energy, alignment and being in the present moment, we move towards non-dual awareness."

The Eastern concept of non-dual awareness helps to stop us from collapsing into an egocentric identification (the fearful mind) which, as we know, can bring about suffering and inner turmoil. By contrast, establishing a non-dual mindset enables us to remain in pure awareness, in an authentic state of consciousness. "The idea of Zen Yoga is to melt away physical, mental and emotional resistance so we can live life more fearlessly and move closer to inner bliss", says Daizan.

Zen Yoga is also based upon the Eastern system of five elements and as a result recognise five seasons in every year. Besides the four seasons that we're already familiar with, there's also a season called harvest time which falls in late summer, like the Indian summer. "Now, we are moving into spring, a time for self-growth and blossoming", says Daizan. "And there are certain energy lines in our body that are worth cultivating at this time of year."

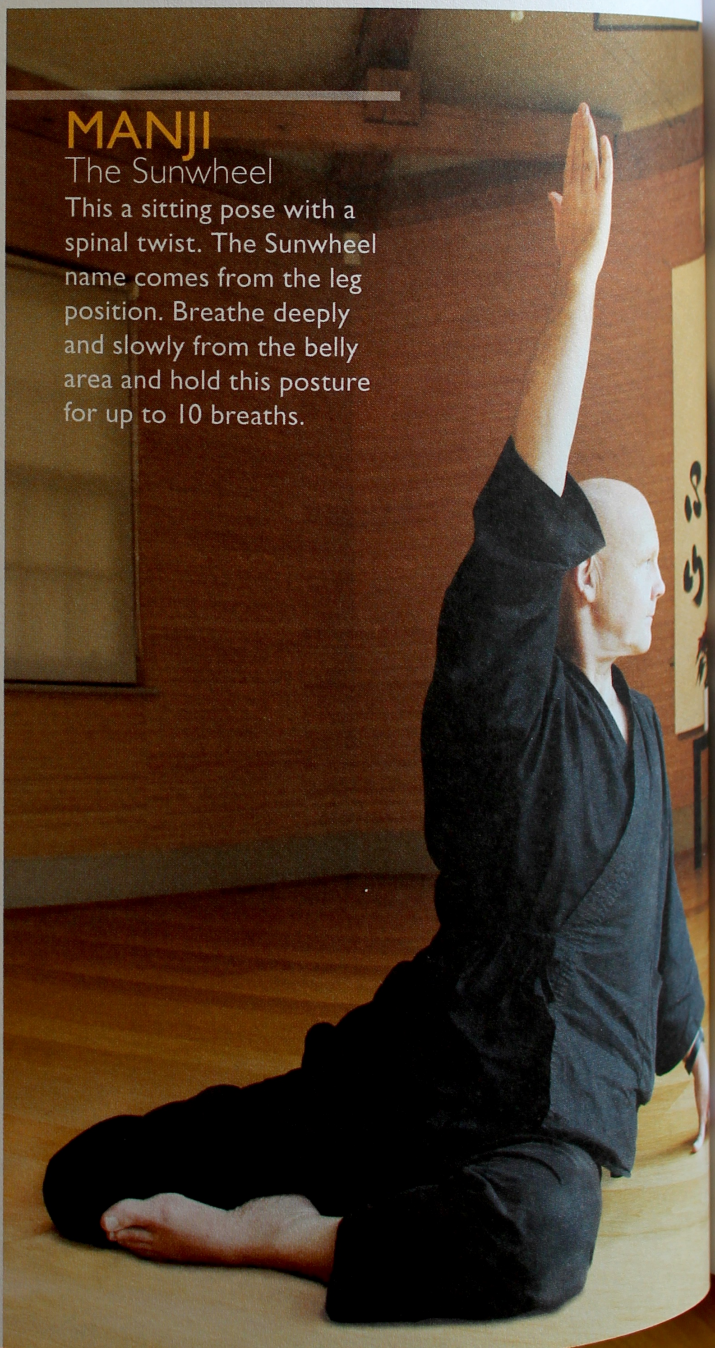
Spring time is associated with the element of wood, due to its quality of growth and renewal. The wood of spring symbolises rebirth, a 'raring to go' type of energy, following the winter season of rest and hibernation.

The wood element is embodied in the liver and the gallbladder. The liver is sometimes called the 'Official of Planning', the architect of our vision of the future. Its paired organ, the gallbladder gives us the ability to make decisions wisely. In accordance with the clarity of vision this element is also associated with the eyes and our inner vision. During the spring season we particularly need to nurture the liver and gallbladder so that our evolution and future-focus can unfold harmoniously and successfully. We can then blossom and grow with the bountiful energy of this time of year. Spring is an inspirational time where we can implement positive changes in our lives. Here are five Zen Yoga poses to tune you into the season of spring:

MANJI

The Sunwheel

This is a sitting pose with a spinal twist. The Sunwheel name comes from the leg position. Breathe deeply and slowly from the belly area and hold this posture for up to 10 breaths.





MATSURU

The Pine

You are standing in Half Lotus or with your foot on the inside of the straight leg with your upper arm palm on the back of the neck or between the shoulder blades. Take long inhalations and exhalations and hold this posture for five to ten breaths.

These three Zen Yoga poses help to open, strengthen and balance the liver energy meridian which runs up the insides of the legs, through the groin area and then to the left and right side of the torso. When these energy lines are blocked or closed we tend to experience anger. When they are open and free our emotional state moves towards kindness and creativity. Apply mindfulness to the body. In this very moment, notice where things feel tight, blocked or restricted. Equally be aware of the openness, freedom and aliveness you can detect. Just by applying this present-moment non-judgmental awareness in these poses you will be nourishing the liver and the body will come more fully alive.



BASARA

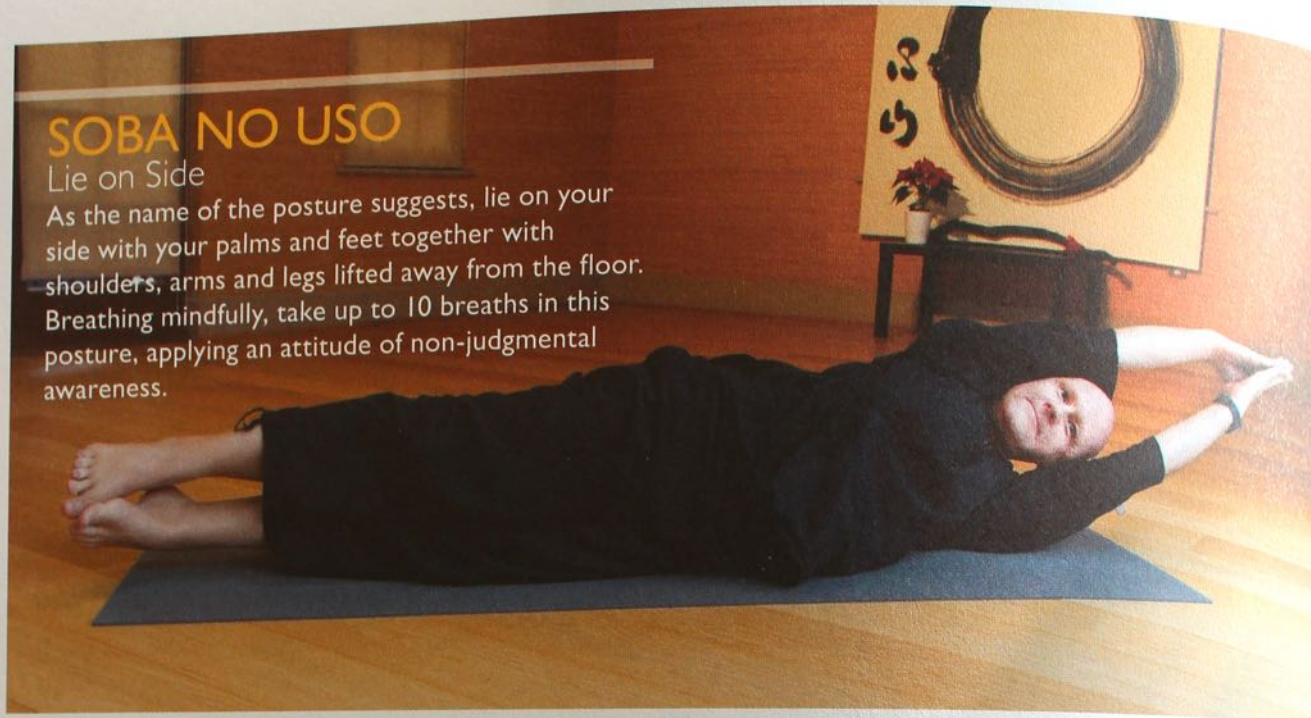
Thunderbolt

Simply lie on your back on the floor with your palms together and stretched out above your head. The soles of your feet are also together, slightly away from the floor with the trunk tilted left and right. Breathing deeply and mindfully, hold this pose for five to 10 breaths.

SOBA NO USO

Lie on Side

As the name of the posture suggests, lie on your side with your palms and feet together with shoulders, arms and legs lifted away from the floor. Breathing mindfully, take up to 10 breaths in this posture, applying an attitude of non-judgmental awareness.



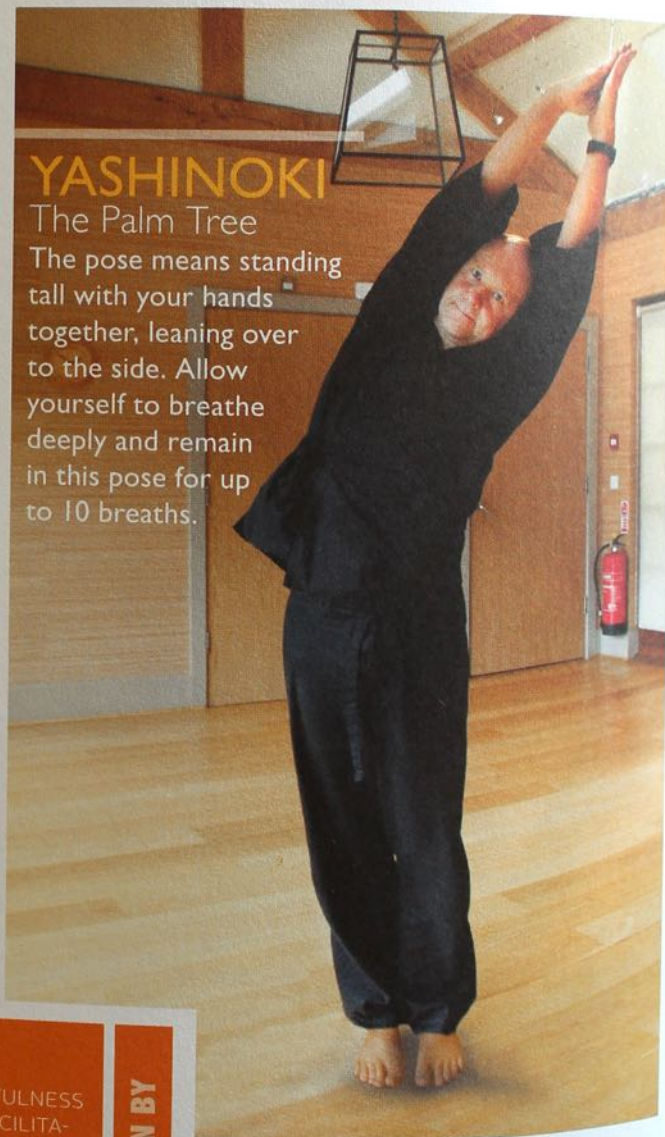
These Zen Yoga poses are focused on the gallbladder meridians which run from the sides of the head and neck, around the shoulders and down the left and right sides of the body and legs. When the gallbladder energy lines are closed or restricted we tend to feel a quality of emotional frustration. Many headaches originate with gall bladder imbalances. On the other hand, when these energy lines are open and fortified we become decisive, determined and clear. Once you move into these two Zen Yoga poses, enjoy five to 10 breaths in each posture, applying a quality of non-judgmental awareness to the body. Notice any sensations arising, particularly in the sides, in the head, neck and trunk. By applying an attitude of mindfulness, the gallbladder lines will become unblocked and be free. Our whole approach to life can then shift. Possibilities will become realities. And you will slowly begin to feel far more liberated and happier within yourself.

The next Intensive 200hr Yoga Teacher Training course with Daizan Skinner Roshi is from 19 August-2 September at Anam Cara in the UK. For more information or to book a place please visit www.zenways.org

YASHINOKI

The Palm Tree

The pose means standing tall with your hands together, leaning over to the side. Allow yourself to breathe deeply and remain in this pose for up to 10 breaths.



SARAH BLADEN

SARAH IS A FREELANCE WRITER, ZEN MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS TEACHER, INTUITIVE ENERGY HEALER AND CHAKRADANCE FACILITATOR. SARAH SPENT ALMOST TWO-YEARS TRAINING WITH A HIMALAYAN YOGI IN INDIA AND IS PASSIONATE ABOUT GUIDING OTHERS TO OVERCOME HEARTBREAK, DEPRESSION AND STRESS TO CONNECT TO THE SOURCE OF BLISS WITHIN. TO BOOK A SESSION WITH SARAH PLEASE VISIT ONCLOUDZEN.COM

WRITTEN BY