

Masterclass

Yogi Vishvketu & Chétana Panwar

Discovering **Harmony** with the Sound of the Bees



According to the Hatha Yoga Pradipika,
“By doing Brahmaree one becomes
lord of the yogis and the mind is
absorbed in bliss” (II:68).

www.yogamagazine.us

With the approaching 9th anniversary of my arrival in Canada as a yoga teacher from India, I have been reflecting on the shifts I have noticed in the yoga community in the West. I have noticed an under-use of simple yogic techniques that would most benefit Western practitioners given their fast-paced, high-stress environment replete with change and uncertainty.

When I first arrived, the yoga boom was in full swing. One of the first places that offered me the opportunity to teach in spite of my rudimentary English was a large community fitness centre in a suburb of my new city. When I met with the now former fitness manager, he stressed that if they were to bring yoga into the facility, it would have to be Power Yoga – this in spite of the reality of their clientele being mostly beginners and 50+. When I arrived in the room, it was extremely cold, as the weight room and treadmills were just a partition away. I had the class time reduced to an hour as we could not stand to do more than 5 minutes of savasana in such cold. People were either coming to the class after kick-boxing as a way to relax and stretch out, or because they were already exercising, but wanted to try a different mind-body modality as a way of dealing with stress. Ironically, the manager's perception that the centre needed to offer a 'fitness-based' type of yoga, plus the environment of the room, were at odds with the real needs and wishes of the students.

Recognizing the fast-paced lifestyle of the west, and the disconnected or unrooted feeling that stems from chronic moving house, living away from family and community, constant change of jobs as one contract comes to an end and another begins – what I felt would benefit my students was the opportunity to slow down, and connect with that essence within them that is always present, the witness-consciousness. Coming from a traditional yogic ashram setting in Rishikesh, where the rituals and routine of the day lend a sort of timelessness, one of my greatest desires was to share meditative sequences and experiences with my classes. That is when I started designing and teaching what I call a Hatha-Raja class style with the Brahmaree pranayama (bumble-bee sound) incorporated into the postures.

This method of teaching was inspired by an experience I had during my MA Yoga programme in 1997, when a local Haridwar sadhu (ascetic monk) was brought in to teach us one day at our regular morning class from 5:30-7. In that class he had us do Brahmaree during the entire Savasana. The result was profound, and I woke up to the amazing benefits of the technique. I had grown up in the foothills of the Himalayas in a gurukul (ashram school) doing a lot of pranayama, both during the postures and seated, and so I was already convinced of the powerful use of pranayama to expand and direct the prana in the nadis drawing one into a natural meditation. But Brahmaree was not a regular part of our repertoire. I continued to practice daily what the sadhu showed us, and began to experiment with using it in different postures. I immediately noticed the expansive and balancing effect it had on the heart, throat and head chakras.

As the vibration builds in the upper chest, throat, nasal cavity and cranium, it is said to optimise the functioning of the glands in those areas, while also stimulating those chakras in the subtle body. The thymus gland behind the sternum is related to immune function and to the heart chakra. The thyroid gland in the throat (related to the throat chakra) is responsible for metabolism. The pineal and pituitary glands in the brain (related

to the 3rd eye and crown chakras) help to regulate serotonin, the wellbeing hormone, and the whole body's chemistry respectively. "Vibrating the cerebral cortex sends impulses to the hypothalamus which as the capacity to control the pituitary gland – the master of all glands. In this way, brahmari done regularly for only a few minutes daily... keeps the endocrine system regulated." (Dr. Singh). By creating calm and chemical balance in the body, we allow for the sense of wellbeing to permeate the body and mind. For the thought-waves of the mind to come into a less frenetic motion. The long, extended breath caused by the humming sound also creates peacefulness – still the breath, still the mind.

The breath, the mind, and sound are all rhythms, vibrations. When we are stressed, the rhythms of the body become frenetic – the breath is shallow and halting, the heart-rate fast and irregular, our mind flitting over and over through the stories of the things that are stressing us. Yogic techniques like deep breathing create a radical shift, and as we modify the breath and bring it into an undulating rhythm, so we create homeostasis in the rest of the body; the body returns to its naturally-balanced rhythmic state including heart-rate, respiration, brain waves and even cerebro-spinal fluid. Pranayama is one way of initiating this balancing of the rhythms of the body and mind. Harmonious vibration, or sound is another. Brahmaree, as a sound in the pranayama repertoire, spans both.

According to Ayurveda, sound is related to Akasha (ether). The electric impulses of the brain are also related to Akasha.

So, through sound, such as mantra (literally meaning liberation of the mind), and the sonorous Brahmaree pranayama, we can gain mastery over the mind. These gems of wisdom from yogic and Ayurvedic texts, as well as my practice, guided me to a sequence of postures with Brahmaree that was geared towards stimulating the glands of the brain – while also helping the practitioner to stay grounded and not space out through the etheric quality of stimulating the upper chakras. For me, this meant simple postures such as Tadasana (palm tree) with breath and sound being tied to arm movements; grounding tilts like Marjariasana (cat) that can be preformed as oscillations with the Brahmaree pranayama; and forward bends.

One of the graduates of our 40-hour Hatha-Raja teacher training programmes, France (Satya Vati) Landriault says that she incorporates Brahmaree with some of the asanas in her yoga classes. "The vibration created by a whole group of people all doing Brahmaree is so powerful it just inhabits the whole mind bringing it to one-pointed focus. After this we can move into meditation." Others of our graduates have found that using Brahmaree with some simple movements is very effective and balancing in prenatal yoga classes. This is corroborated by research at the Sadar Hospital in Munger, India, where Dr. Vibha Singh studied the effects of regular Brahmaree Pranayama on 112 pregnant women in 1993. She noted a decrease in pre-term delivery, hypertension, anxiety and insomnia as well as shorter labour times.

Over time and under new management, the suburban com-

munity centre where I first taught has expanded the diversity of yoga classes teachers can offer and they are increasingly holistic, including pranayama, mantra and meditation. I see this as a general trend in the yoga community – the desire to explore all of what yoga has to offer. It is my hope that meditative approaches like Hatha-Raja Yoga with the Brahmaree pranayama will be increasingly available and will serve to benefit more people looking for grounding, connectedness, and wellbeing.

I am pleased to present here an example of a short 20-minute Hatha-Raja Yoga sequence. Postures done with Brahmaree pranayama can also be incorporated as part of a regular yoga class or home practice.

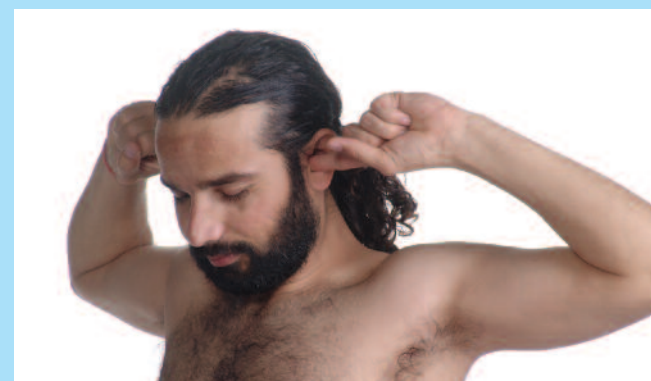


Yogi Vishvketu and Chétana Panwar now divide their time between Canada and Anand Prakash Yoga Ashram in Rishikesh (India) where they offer Akhanda (holistic) Yoga Teacher Training courses. The 500-hour YTT courses include learning to teach Hatha-Raja Yoga. To

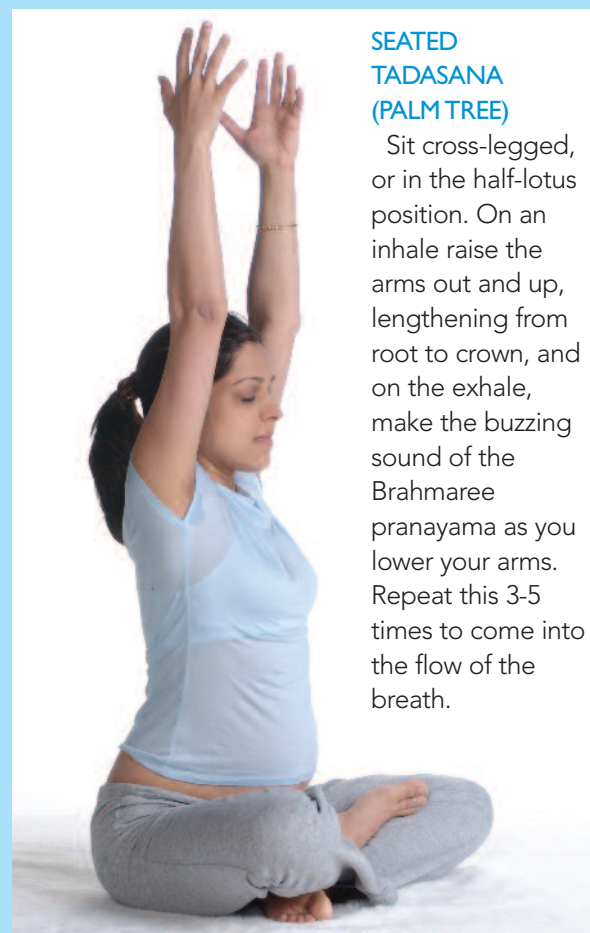


find out more about their courses and retreats please visit www.worldyogafamily.com.

Visit www.anandprakashashram.com to explore what the ashram has to offer.



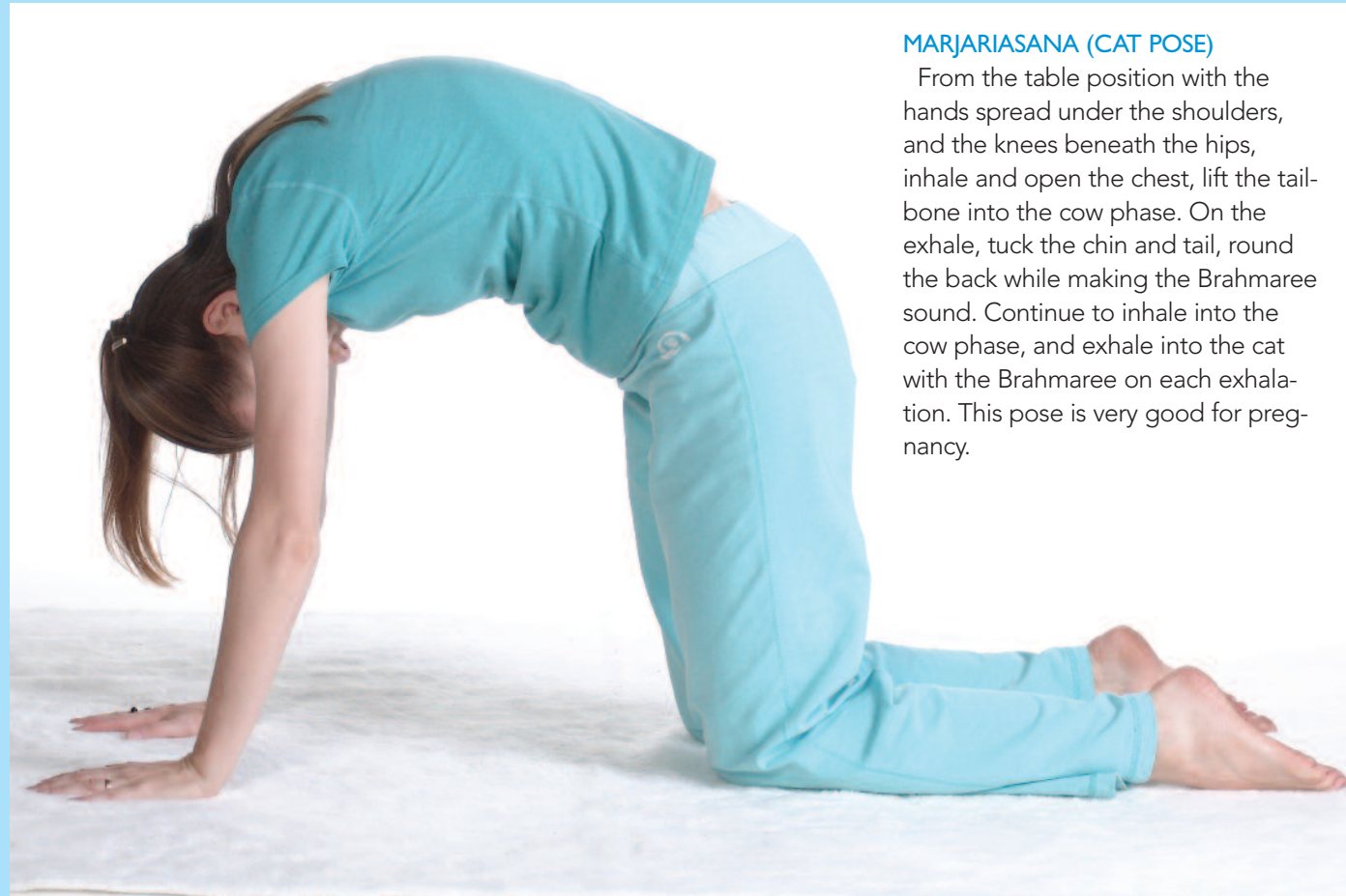
First, get familiar with Brahmaree pranayama. When you are first learning Brahmaree pranayama, it helps to close the ears with the index finger and listen to the sound. Inhale slowly and deeply, and as you exhale, make a humming noise like the buzzing of a bee. Notice how the sound vibrates your chest, throat, nasal passages and crown. Rest the tongue on the roof of your mouth gently, your mouth closed but your jaw relaxed. See if you can get the vibration between the throat and the nose as opposed to entirely in the voice box region. Experiment with lower and higher pitches, and notice their effects. If you want more grounding, lower the pitch, and if you want a more etheric effect, raise the pitch. You may notice that in certain poses it is easier to make a higher than a lower pitch, such as in forward bends.



SEATED TADASANA (PALM TREE)
Sit cross-legged, or in the half-lotus position. On an inhale raise the arms out and up, lengthening from root to crown, and on the exhale, make the buzzing sound of the Brahmaree pranayama as you lower your arms. Repeat this 3-5 times to come into the flow of the breath.



SIDE STRETCH
Inhale your left arm up, and on the exhalation, reach in a diagonal motion towards the right side. Place your right hand on the floor for support; you may even be able to rest on your right elbow and forearm, but make sure you are not collapsing through the torso. Breathe here, and on each exhalation make the Brahmaree sound.



MARJARIASANA (CAT POSE)

From the table position with the hands spread under the shoulders, and the knees beneath the hips, inhale and open the chest, lift the tailbone into the cow phase. On the exhale, tuck the chin and tail, round the back while making the Brahmaree sound. Continue to inhale into the cow phase, and exhale into the cat with the Brahmaree on each exhalation. This pose is very good for pregnancy.



PARVATASANA (MOUNTAIN POSE)

From the table position, press into the roots of the fingers and raise the hips up and back until you are in the inverted V-shape of Mountain pose (also called Downward Dog). Keep your knees bent if that helps you to lengthen the spine. Take three breaths here, and on each exhalation perform Brahmaree. Then bend your knees and come back to the table position.



ARDHA YOGA MUDRA (CHILD POSE)

Now, sit back on your heels, and melt your torso onto your thighs in Child's pose.

Breathe deeply here, and on every exhalation make the bumble-bee sound.



PASCHIMOTTANASANA (SEATED FORWARD BEND)

Extend your legs in front of you, and bring some of the flesh out from underneath your buttocks. If you have lower back issues or sciatica, walk your hands just a bit down your thighs so that you can keep your back long. If you are able to come into the full position, inhale and lengthen your spine into the halfway flat back position. On the exhale, lower your torso towards your legs. You can perform the toe hold by wrapping the index and

middle finger around your big toe. This is a surrendering posture – relax your shoulders and head. Take several breaths here and on every exhalation perform Brahmaree. When you are ready to come up, if you have a sore back, on an inhalation slowly walk your hands up your thighs. Otherwise, inhale reach your arms forward and up, coming through the flat back position. Exhale and lower your arms by your sides.

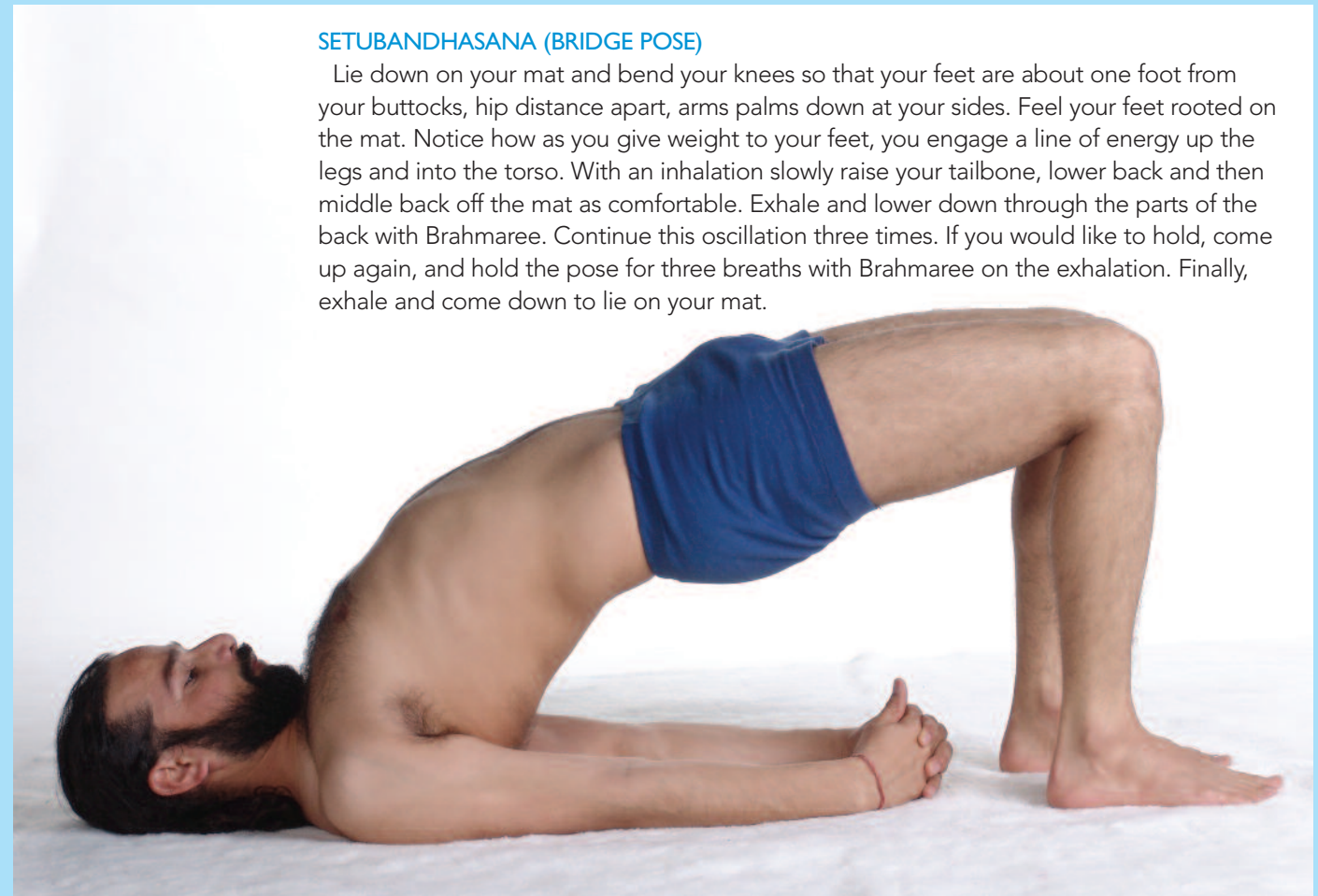
INVERTED TABLE

Bend the knees and place your feet about one foot from your buttocks. Place the hands down about a foot behind you, fingers facing your feet. On an inhalation press your feet down and raise your hips up. Engage the inner thighs to keep the legs parallel. You can keep the neck in line with the spine to help support your alignment in this pose. Take three breaths here, and make three sweet Brahmarees. Exhale and lower yourself back to sitting. This posture is also very good for pregnancy.



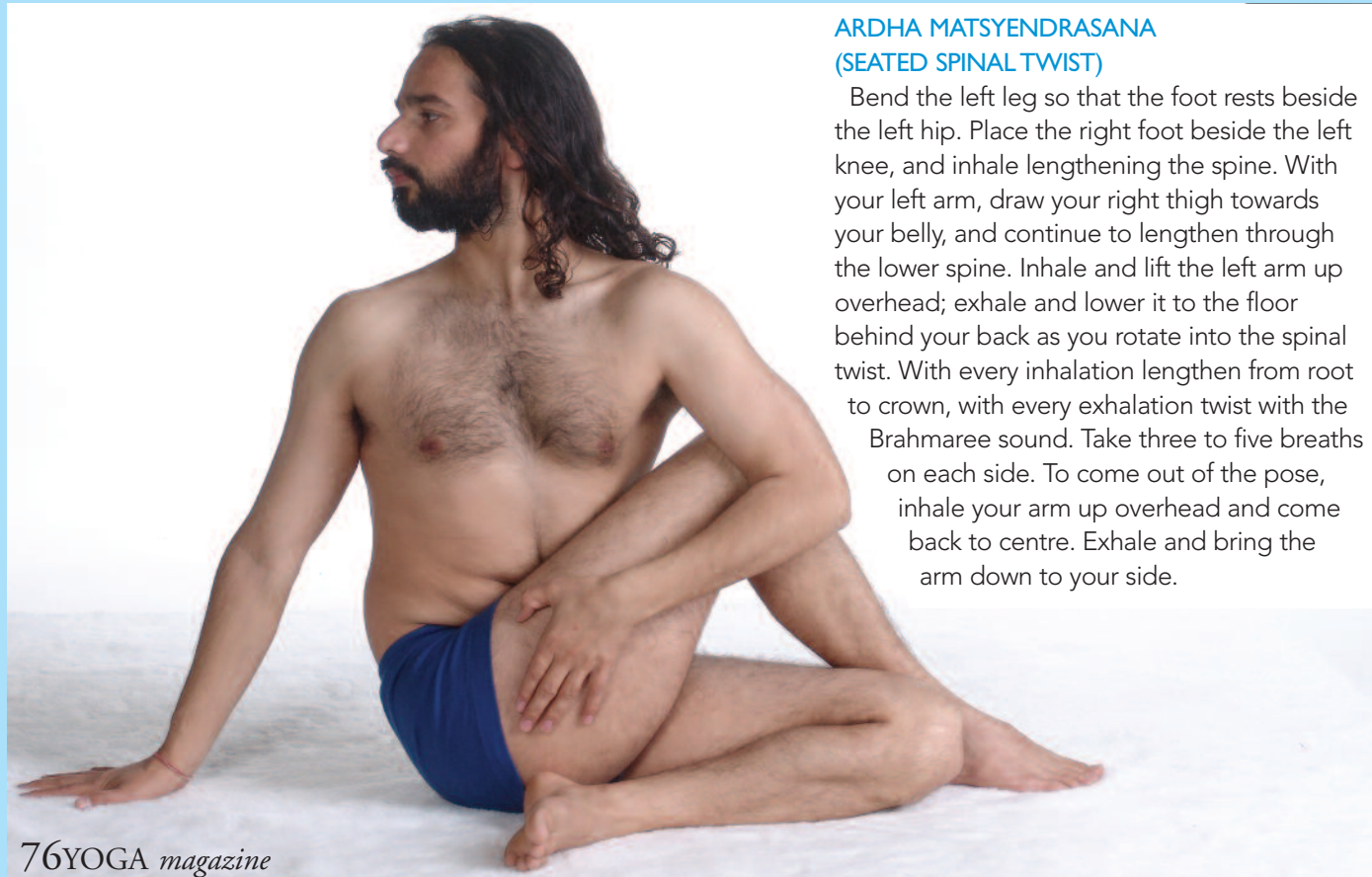
SETUBANDHASANA (BRIDGE POSE)

Lie down on your mat and bend your knees so that your feet are about one foot from your buttocks, hip distance apart, arms palms down at your sides. Feel your feet rooted on the mat. Notice how as you give weight to your feet, you engage a line of energy up the legs and into the torso. With an inhalation slowly raise your tailbone, lower back and then middle back off the mat as comfortable. Exhale and lower down through the parts of the back with Brahmaree. Continue this oscillation three times. If you would like to hold, come up again, and hold the pose for three breaths with Brahmaree on the exhalation. Finally, exhale and come down to lie on your mat.



ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA (SEATED SPINAL TWIST)

Bend the left leg so that the foot rests beside the left hip. Place the right foot beside the left knee, and inhale lengthening the spine. With your left arm, draw your right thigh towards your belly, and continue to lengthen through the lower spine. Inhale and lift the left arm up overhead; exhale and lower it to the floor behind your back as you rotate into the spinal twist. With every inhalation lengthen from root to crown, with every exhalation twist with the Brahmaree sound. Take three to five breaths on each side. To come out of the pose, inhale your arm up overhead and come back to centre. Exhale and bring the arm down to your side.



SAVASANA (CORPSE POSE)

Lie in savasana either on a bolster or flat on your back. Stretch your heels forward and release the lower back towards the earth, trying to remove the space between your lower back and the mat. Then relax. With the first few exhalations, make the Brahmaree sound. Then let go of this practice and relax. Take this time to absorb the benefits of the Hatha-Raja class.

