

ANUSARA YOGA'S

THREE "A's"
and . . .

ATTITUDE

open to grace;
soften to an energy
larger than ourselves;
"align with the divine"

ALIGNMENT

align our efforts to
embody and express
our heart's intentions

ACTION

From a foundation of
attitude and alignment,
we then move into
skillful actions, both on
and off the yoga mat

**SIX 'UNIVERSAL
PRINCIPLES OF
ALIGNMENT'** can . . .

1. OPEN TO GRACE

and: rest your focus
on a steady *ujjayi* breath

and: set the foundation
of the pose

2. MUSCLE ENERGY

3. EXPANDING SPIRALS

4. CONTRACTING SPIRALS

5. LOOPS

ankle loop
shin loop
thigh loop
pelvic loop
kidney loop
shoulder loop
skull loop

6. ORGANIC ENERGY

**TRANSFORM YOGA
INTO A MOVING
MEDITATION**

As there are pulsations in
every cell in our bodies,
in our breath and
heartbeat, in the tides and
the seasons, so too do we
experience pulsations
within our *asana* practices.

Within each pose we
balance softness with
strength, receptivity with
focus, reflection with
effort, fiery passion with
quiet.

By thoughtfully balancing
opposite qualities and
pulsations in our yoga
practices, we strengthen
our abilities to find
balance off the mat as
well, to stay aligned with
our highest intentions in
the face of challenges and
distractions.

We cultivate openness to
whole-hearted
participation in the gift of
this brief lifetime.

These are notes that I wrote up for my students to briefly summarize John Friend's 'Universal Principles of Alignment' that characterize Anusara Yoga.

In these notes I focus on physical actions and effects. For a detailed interpretation of 'Open to Grace' and *ujjayi* breathing, please see the chapters 'Grace' and 'Breath' in my book *Healing Yoga for People Living with Cancer*, also on my website.

Please note that any mistakes in interpretation are wholly my own. To read about the principles in detail, please see John Friend's *Anusara Yoga Teacher Training Manual, 8th Edition*

1. Set the foundation of the pose

Anusara Yoga's three A's -- Attitude, Alignment and Action -- are guidelines of how to align ourselves with our highest intentions on the mat -- or, how to set the foundation of a pose and a practice both emotionally & mentally.

Physically setting the foundation of a pose can be a way to embody your emotional and mental intention. Physically setting the foundation means noticing the tactile sensations of where your body touches the ground, committing and re-committing to anchoring down into the ground, and anchoring the four corners of your feet and hands.

Focusing on foundation can help when you feel ungrounded, frenzied, or agitated. It can remind you of the ground you stand on -- the ground of your intentions, faith, and history.

Actions to set foundation in feet

(These actions set your foundation when standing, AND in any pose, help to recruit muscle energy in your legs and pelvis.) Stand with your

feet hips' width and parallel, broaden and lengthen your toes on the ground, soften your knees slightly.

Press down through mounds of big toes = so that you feel a muscular strengthening / heating up in your inner lower legs

Press down and isometrically wide through your inner heels = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your inner thigh muscles

Press down through mounds of little toes = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your outer lower legs

Press down and isometrically wide through your outer heels = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your outer thighs

Actions to set foundation in hands

(These actions set your foundation when your weight is on your hands, AND, in any pose, begin to generate muscle energy and the spirals in your arms and shoulders.) With your fingers spread wide:

Press down through mounds of first fingers = so that you feel a muscular strengthening / heating up in your inner lower arms

Press down and isometrically wide through your mounds of thumbs = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your biceps

Press down through mounds of little fingers = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your outer lower arms

Press down and isometrically wide through your outer heels of your palms = so that you feel a muscular strengthening in your triceps and in your shoulder blades pressing forward onto your back body

Keep pressure down through four points of hands AND lift up away from the ground through the center line of the palms, like a suction cup

Effects of setting a foundation

Grounds the base of a pose and begins the actions of muscle energy, expanding and contracting spirals.

2. Muscle energy

Anusara Yoga's alignment principles remain consistent from pose to pose. So, when you learn the sequence of how to use 'muscle energy,' you will apply that sequence in every pose.

'Muscle energy' generates solidity and strength in your body without rigidity, like a tree that bends in a storm but doesn't break.

Focusing on muscle energy is useful when you want to embody qualities such as courage, steadfastness, stillness, commitment and integrity.

Actions of muscle energy

These actions apply to every pose, and describe drawing inward in three directions:

- a. circumferential: skeletal muscles hug bones
- b. medial: limbs isometrically draw back toward midline
- c. periphery to core: arm / leg bones draw into their joints

As an example, to activate muscle energy in your lower body while standing in mountain pose, stand with your feet hips' width and parallel, knees straight but not locked, arms down by your sides:

- a. circumferential: set the four points of your feet = fires up leg and foot muscles; isometrically slide heels back = fires up hamstrings
- b. medial: isometrically draw legs together = fires up inner thighs
- c. periphery to core: isometrically try to lift feet off floor = fires up quadriceps, deepens femurs into hip joints

Effects of using muscle energy

- a. helps to prevent injuries, as you draw your bones deep into their joints

- b. stabilizes poses so that you can balance (on one foot, two hands, etc...)
- c. teaches you how to use specific muscles / muscle groups
- d. makes challenging poses more accessible and safe
- e. energizes your practice

3. Expanding spirals

In each pose, after foundation and muscle energy, the next layer of action is to create expanding, then contracting, spirals in legs and arms.

Why the image of 'spiraling' versus 'rotation'? Rotation means turning around an axis, a limited movement around a center point. Spiraling suggests a continuously increasing or decreasing distance around and from a center point. It's the difference between the movement and energy of a merry-go-round versus the movement and energy of a tornado.

Focusing on expanding and contracting spirals can be useful to contemplate the issue of balance in your life off the mat. Spirals can be an exploration of balance -- between retreating and advancing, drawing in and expanding out, taking and giving, etc.

Actions of expanding spirals in legs

In standing, with your knees soft but not bent, press down and wide on outer edges of feet, squeeze lower legs isometrically midline, and slide inner thighs back in space, then broad laterally. (Summary of actions: outer edges of feet widen, lower legs narrow, thighs widen.)

Expanding spiral runs from the outer edges of your feet *up* to your back waist, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top like a tornado shape.

Actions of expanding spirals in arms

On all fours, set the foundation of the four points of your hands, which begins the expanding spiral in your arms/shoulders. As you isometrically try to slide the heels of your hands laterally – as if your middle fingers magnetically want to turn toward each other – then squeeze your lower arms toward the midline and broaden your upper arms laterally. (Summary of actions: heels of hands widen, lower arms narrow, upper arms widen.)

Effects of using expanding spirals

Expanding spiral anchors feet; strengthens lower legs; broadens back of pelvis as groins soften and hollow; and moves thigh bones back and wide.

Expanding spiral firms muscles of arms, chest, shoulders, and back; telescopes arm bones deeper into shoulder joints; gently lifts chest.

4. Contracting spirals

Actions of contracting spirals in legs

In standing, do actions of expanding spiral first. Then, from your back waist down through your sacrum, strongly anchor your tailbone down in the direction of your feet. But, instead of moving like an arrow toward one point, broaden out the energy toward the inner edges of your feet. (Summary of actions: anchor sacrum and tailbone down to inner edges of feet.)

Contracting spiral runs *down* from your back waist and sacrum to the outer edges of your feet, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, like a traffic cone.

Actions of contracting spirals in arms

On all fours, foundation and expanding spiral first. Then, from your upper back / shoulder blades, extend energy out through your hands,

subtly narrowing upper arms, and widening lower arms. If fingers have spun toward one another during setting foundation and expanding spiral, then contracting spiral will drag hands back into alignment so middle fingers face forward. (Summary of actions: upper arms narrow, lower arms widen, heels of hands drag back into alignment midline.)

Effects of using contracting spirals

Contracting spiral stabilizes upper body; slides shoulder blades down back in the direction of waist and presses shoulder blades firmly onto back body.

Contracting spiral anchors feet and legs; lengthens sacrum /and lower back; protects hamstrings; engages pelvic floor and core body muscles.

5. Loops

In Anusara yoga, the seven 'loops' are "...circular flows of subtle energy that rotate in the sagittal plane of the body and interconnect to each other like gears." (*Anusara Yoga Teacher Training Manual, 8th edition*, by John Friend)

Ankle and calf loops

Ankle and calf loops spin in opposite directions, like water wheels, to generate power.

Focusing on ankle and calf loops is useful when you want to ground yourself. As a lightning rod grounds excess voltage, so too can you embody 'grounding down' excess tension or anxiety through ankle loop, while embodying 'drawing up' earth qualities such as steadiness, solidity, and patience through calf loop.

Actions of ankle loop

Stand with knees soft but not bent, and feet parallel and hips' width apart. Starting from the base of your shin just above your ankle, lengthen *down* through your heel. Lift *up* through the center of the sole of your foot, both inner and outer arches, back up to base of your shin.

Actions of calf loop

Ankle loop first, then, starting from the base of your shin just above the ankle, lengthen *up* through the back of your calf to just below your knee, and lengthen *down* through your shin back to your ankle.

Effects of using ankle and calf loops

Ankle loop brings feet into better alignment, positively affecting the alignment of your legs, pelvis and spine.

Calf loop fires up lower leg muscles, which will stabilize and strengthen your poses and positively affect alignment of your legs, pelvis and spine.

Thigh, kidney and pelvic loops

In ankle and calf loop, the energy spins in *opposite* directions, like water wheels. In contrast, the energy in thigh and pelvic loops spin in the *same* directions: down through the back plane of the body, up through the front plane of the body. Then, kidney loop spins in the *opposite* direction of pelvic loop, again like a water wheel, creating a figure-eight of energy intersecting just below the navel.

Focusing on thigh and pelvic loops is useful when you want to embody effectiveness and clarity. As a hunting cat focuses intensely on its prey, drawing into itself before pouncing, so too you might imagine condensing your energy through thigh and pelvic loops so that your actions are effective and clear.

Focusing on kidney loop is useful when you want to embody vitality, personal power, and enthusiasm, like a spark bursting into flame, or a kite catching wind and zooming up into the sky.

Actions of thigh loop

From pelvic floor, anchor *down* through buttocks and hamstrings, then forward through top of shin just below knee, and lift *up* through quads back to pelvic floor.

Actions of pelvic loop

From back waist (level with just below navel), anchor *down* through lower back and top of buttocks, then scoop tailbone forward and lengthen *up* through pubic bone back to navel.

Actions of kidney loop

Kidney loop initiates just below navel in the core of the abdomen and lengthens *up* and puffs out through the lower back to base of shoulder blades, then forward at base of heart and anchors back *down* from base of sternum to just below navel.

Effects of practicing thigh, pelvic and kidney loops

Thigh and pelvic loops gives you incredible access to your core strength and stability. Kidney loop adds fiery energy and lightness to your yoga!

Shoulder and skull loops

Shoulder and skull loops create the final figure eight of energy. Shoulder and skull loops intersect at the upper palate, or roof of your mouth. From your upper palate, shoulder loop moves *down* to bottom of shoulder blades, forward through base of heart, then *up* front of chest and throat back to upper palate. Skull loop runs from the upper palate back *up* and *over* the top of your skull, then back *down* to the upper palate.

Focusing on shoulder and skull loops is useful when you wish to embody courageousness, clarity and compassion -- the ability to see things clearly, as they actually are, and being with the truth of your experience while keeping a soft heart.

Actions of shoulder loop

Float the sides of your torso up, all the way through the roof of your mouth; float the head of the arm bones up and back; slide your shoulder blades gently down – then forward – deeper onto your back body. You'll find these actions gently lift your heart, and your shoulder blades, like friendly hands, will support the back of your heart.

Actions of skull loop

Slide your ears *back* in space (yup, still attached to your head), lengthen *up* through the back of your skull, and relax the muscles of your face (*down*), like a marionette being lifted lightly by a string attached to the top of your head.

Effects of practicing shoulder and skull loops

Many of us share a habitual stance: shoulders slightly rounded forward, upper back slightly hunched, head hanging forward, and gaze focused slightly down. Practicing shoulder and skull loops can bring greater alignment and dignity to our stance: heart lifted, shoulders back, head upright, gaze forward.

6. Organic energy

In each pose, after foundation, muscle energy, and spirals, the final layer of action is to create organic energy.

Playing with balance between muscle energy and organic energy on the mat gives strength/solidity AND softness/lightness to your poses, as well as being a way to contemplate the balance between energies in your life off the mat.

Focusing on organic energy is useful when you want to embody potential, hope, fullness, generosity, and living large!

Actions of organic energy

These actions apply to every pose, and describe radiating outward in three directions:

- a. concentric expansion: expand energy out from bones to muscles to skin
- b. away from midline: isometric expansion of limbs away from midline

- c. from core to the periphery: expanding energy out from core toward hands, feet, head

Effects of organic energy

Remember that the actions of muscle energy are to draw in, to engage your muscles onto your bones like a warm embrace, and as a means of creating solidity, dense strength, and stillness. Organic energy is the mirror opposite, a means of radiating out and expanding into the space around you.