

the dizzying number of yoga practices

may leave you wondering: What's most important? What do I really need to practice? How do I get the most benefit in the time I have? The answers to these questions will vary with the individual, but in hatha yoga there are a few indispensable master practices. *Agni sara* is one of them. Combining elements of pranayama and asana training, the practice of agni sara is quintessential hatha yoga. The ultimate goal of hatha is to garner the scattered instinctive energies of life and harness them for the inward journey, and that is exactly what agni sara does for us.

With its deep contractions of the abdomen and pelvic floor, agni sara targets the abdominal organs and the centers of consciousness (chakras) responsible for regulating and carrying out the instinctive life of the body. It therefore affects not only our physical health but also our vitality and emotional life. Ultimately it facilitates spiritual growth and transformation. The name itself tells us this: *agni*, meaning fire, the elemental quality responsible for digestion, discrimination, and transformation, and *sara*, meaning essence.

According to yoga's esoteric anatomy, each of the chakras makes specific contributions to our overall functioning. The root center, characterized by the earth element and symbolizing stability, is the fundament of earthly existence. Water is the element of the second chakra, the pelvic center. It symbolizes emotional fluidity and the desire to taste the world around us. Agni, fire, is the presiding element of the navel center, a pivotal point of pranic energy—energy that links body and mind. It is through the various subdivisions of prana, functioning in coordination with the navel center, that the body is nourished and sustained.

*agni
sara*

BY SANDRA ANDERSON

building
core
strength



Not surprisingly, considering the activities of these three lower centers, agni sara yields a cornucopia of benefits for the major physiological systems of the body. To start with, it strengthens the musculature of the pelvic floor and abdominal wall, thus supporting the proper placement of organs in the abdomen. This counters the downward force of gravity on the viscera as well as the all-too-familiar collapse of muscle and connective tissue in the abdominal area. Internally, agni sara tones, activates, and cleanses the digestive and eliminative systems. Since many diseases start with stagnation in the digestive tract, the consequences of regular agni sara practice are wide-ranging.

Agni sara contributes to the healthy functioning of other organ systems as well. Contractions of the lower abdominal wall massage the bladder, while contractions of the pelvic floor strengthen muscles used to regulate the stream of urine. Lymphatic fluids, which tend to pool in the abdomen, are pressed upward by the movement of the abdominal wall, and this stimulates healthy functioning of the immune system. Agni sara improves circulation to the organs of the abdomen, including the reproductive organs. In short, all the physiological functions of the abdomen are enhanced by this master practice.

But in addition to its physical benefits, the practice of agni sara is accompanied by subtle changes as well. Increases in vitality resulting

from agni sara translate emotionally into less anxiety and a persistent steadiness in the face of life's challenges. Regular practice increases our capacity to manage emotional distress and prompts a sense of enthusiasm and spiritual confidence. Agni sara prevents the downward collapse of not only physical but also mental and emotional energy, and maintains vigor in all aspects of our being.

The key to recognizing these subtle benefits lies in progressively refining the awareness that we bring to our practice. In the beginning it is enough to work on the postural mechanics of the pose. This will lead to marked changes in the way we perceive our body. But gradually, agni sara creates a strong upward movement of energy and a parallel inward movement of attention. Physical strength leads to more vigorous energy, which in turn manifests in a balanced and steady mind.

To reap these benefits, we must work systematically. Even the basic practice can be difficult, because without making a concentrated effort we seldom isolate or use the deep muscles of the lower abdomen. So even if you are accustomed to doing leg lifts and sit-ups for your abdominal workout, you may find agni sara a bit of a challenge, as the target area is either weak or unresponsive. To help, we'll begin with practices that train the nervous system, mind, and musculature. These preparations will give you access to the deep muscles of the lower abdomen. Then we'll go on to the actual practice of agni sara.

Agni sara targets the abdominal organs and the chakras responsible for regulating and carrying out the instinctive life of the body.



Reclining pelvic tilt

Lie on your back with your feet on the floor a few inches apart and your arms resting on the floor, palms down (Fig. 1). Press the feet evenly into the floor, and note the activation of the inner thighs. Soften your face, jaw, and belly. Establish an even and effortless breath, and let the breath deepen in the body. Soften the back of the body into the floor and bring your awareness into the pelvis and belly. Then exhale deeply and slowly contract all the abdominal muscles. Soften the abdomen as you inhale fully, letting the belly inflate and float up. Then exhale strongly and deeply again, slowly drawing the lower belly and navel toward the spine, and pressing the lower back into the floor, hollowing out the belly. Inhale, release the contraction, and let the back release from the floor passively as the belly fills again.

Repeat, working slowly and easily, breathing deeply, and keeping the thighs and legs grounded and stable. Note that the pelvis rocks gently, rotating around the head of the femurs. On the exhale, the tailbone moves up between the thighs, and the lumbar spine descends into the floor. On the inhale, the pubic bone moves down between the thighs, the tailbone moves into the floor, and the lumbar spine releases. Now pay attention to the muscles and soft tissues. Exhale, contract, squeeze, and draw the lower belly in and up. Sense the space between the pubic bone and the tailbone and contract and release here also. This is the pelvic floor, which is the supporting foundation for the contents of the pelvis.

Now, make the practice more subtle by keeping the pelvis still and stable so the contraction is only in the abdomen and pelvic floor. Imagine squeezing a sponge. Keep the chest, jaw, face, and arms relaxed. Ground gently through the legs to keep the pelvis stable. Repeat 5 times.

Begin to sense the energetic quality of your work, and be aware of the back side of the body. Internalize your awareness and work with a little extra *umph*. Women will draw up through the vaginal barrel and cervix, working as deeply as possible and relaxing as deeply as possible. Squeeze and contract a little harder to sense the energetic body.

Asvini mudra

Next, roll over face down and rest your forehead comfortably on your crossed arms (Fig. 2). Feel the belly pressing into the floor on the inhalation. Exhaling, roll the buttocks toward each other and in, contracting as deeply and as hard as you can. Inhale, release. As before, keep the upper body quiet and relaxed. Let the breath be full and deep. Repeat this movement at least 5 times.

Then, contracting the buttocks as before, engage the sphincter muscles and pelvic floor as well by pulling in and up on the exhale. On the inhale, soften and release, completely relaxing. Repeat this at least 5 times, engaging the sphincter muscles and pelvic floor (perineum). Take a few resting breaths, then sit back in child's pose for a breath or two with your attention still in the pelvic floor, buttocks, lower back, and lower belly.



contraindications

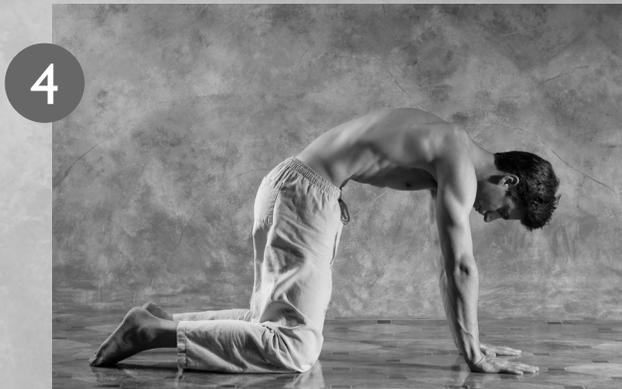
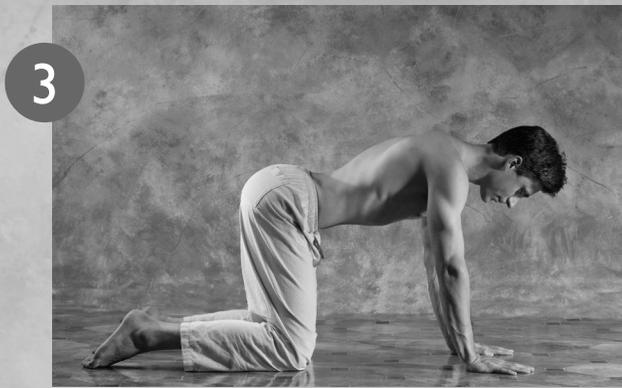
Avoid agni sara if you have a hiatal hernia, are menstruating or pregnant, as well as if you have ulcers, cardiovascular disease, or high blood pressure. This exercise can be irritating to women with IUDs. Practice on an empty stomach. Generally this means waiting three hours following a normal meal.

As with any practice that works with *prana* (the subtle energy of the body), too much too quickly can energize negative tendencies rather than transform them. Practice should leave you feeling peaceful and rejuvenated, not angry, irritated, or spaced out. It is normal to feel heat. It arises from the deepest center of the body and purifies the organs and the subtle energy channels. It has a quality entirely different from the heat generated by aerobic activities, such as jogging or tennis.

Table pose pelvic tilt

Now come onto the hands and knees, with the knees directly under the hip joints and the hands directly under the shoulders (Fig. 3). Press the shins and top of the feet down and press the thighbones away from the center line. Exhale and tuck the tailbone under, draw the lower belly in, and hollow out the abdomen. Keep the upper body stable and quiet (Fig. 4). This is not the cat pose where the whole spine moves! Isolate the movement in the pelvis, and keep the chest and upper body still. Inhale and draw the pubic bone between the thighs, lift the tailbone, and lift and spread the buttock bones (sit bones). Let the lower belly be full. Then exhale and squeeze the navel and abdominal wall toward the spine as you curl the tailbone under. Repeat 5 times.

For the second step, contract and release the abdomen without tilting or rotating the pelvis. Exhale and contract the pelvic floor and lower belly, then inhale and release and soften, relaxing the pelvic floor and letting the lower belly be full and round. Repeat a few times, working for depth and intensity, isolating the movement in the pelvic floor and abdomen. Then sit back on the heels in child's pose and take a couple of resting breaths into the lower belly and back.



A & P

Now that the pelvic floor, inner thighs, lower belly, and lower back are awake, we are ready for the practice of agni sara. Stand comfortably with your feet slightly wider than hip-width apart. Bend the knees and rest the hands on the thighs. Bend forward slightly to bring the weight of the torso over the arms so you can relax the deep muscles of the abdomen which support the lumbar spine. Lengthen the back of the neck and tuck the chin by looking down at the lower belly.

First exhale and hollow out the belly, tucking in the tail, and contracting the sphincters and pelvic floor, drawing in and up. Then inhale and soften, reaching the tailbone back, and dropping the pubic bone back between the thighs so the pelvis again rotates slightly over the head of the femurs. Isolate the movement in the pelvis; the rest of the back is completely still.

Repeat a few times, and then begin to concentrate more on the belly and pelvic floor, and less on the bones and external movement. Exhale and contract the pelvic floor and belly without moving the pelvis. Repeat 5 times. Exhale, draw the abdomen back toward the spine, squeeze the pelvic floor and buttocks and inner thighs. Inhale and soften and completely relax. This is *akunchana prasarana* (abdominal squeeze, or A & P). Practice this for some time if you are new to asana practice, or if it feels a little awkward or clumsy. When A & P is fluid and supple, agni sara will be easy.

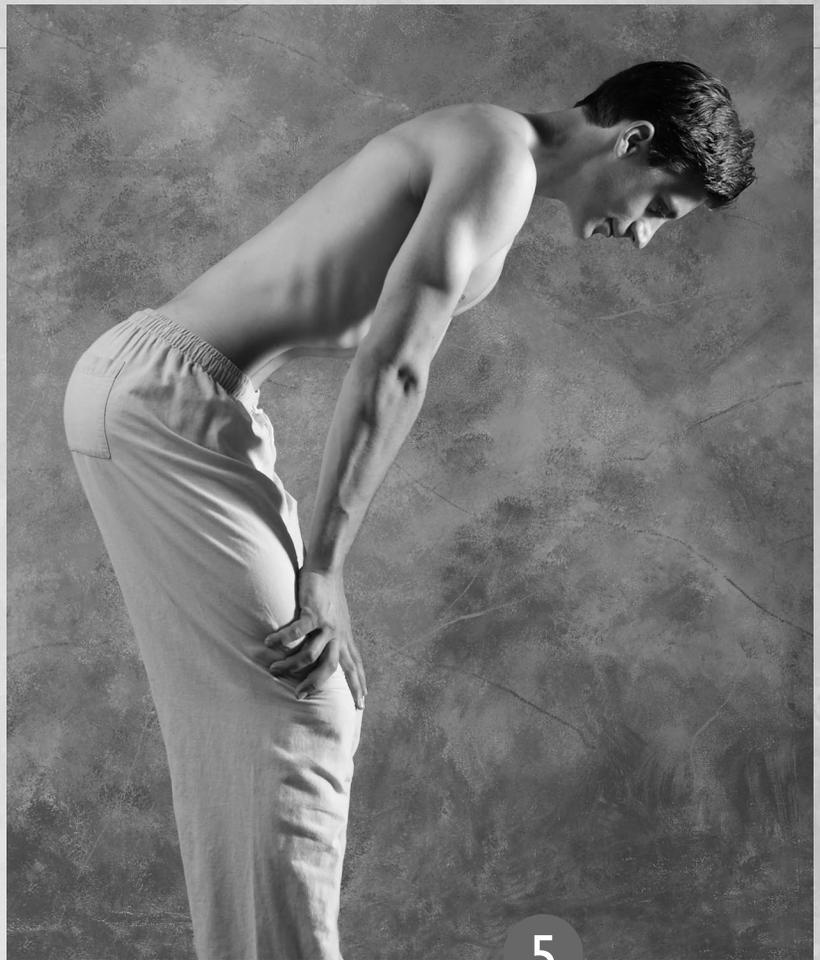
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Agni sara

With a few more refinements, we'll have the full practice of agni sara. This requires a sequential contraction and release of the abdominal muscles. Start by contracting the pelvic floor and the lowest portion of the abdomen (just above the pubic bone) as you begin to exhale. Then contract and pull the lower belly in and up. Continue exhaling and contract the upper belly. When the whole abdominal wall is strongly contracted and drawn in and up, and the breath completely emptied out, suck the diaphragm up under the ribs (Figs. 5 & 6).

Immediately release the diaphragm and begin the inhalation by releasing the upper abdominal wall above the navel center. Then release the lower belly, continue inhaling, and release the pelvic floor as you finish the inhalation. Without pause, begin exhaling and draw the pelvic floor and the lowest portion of the abdomen in and up. Continue exhaling and contract the lower belly. Continue exhaling and contract the upper belly, and draw the diaphragm up. Then release the diaphragm, and as you inhale, release the upper abdomen, then the lower abdomen, and finally the pelvic floor.

Don't worry if you don't feel the diaphragm moving up under the ribs. Instead concentrate on a



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smooth, deep, wave-like contraction, and turning the exhalation around into the inhalation while maintaining the contraction of the lower abdomen. This is a crucial point. Keep the lower belly and pelvic floor contracted and pulled up as you inhale and release the upper abdomen. Notice how you can work the diaphragm independently of the lower abdomen and pelvic floor.

After you have mastered the basic practice, draw awareness more deeply into the body. The more deeply you can feel the work, the better. The front and back sides are drawing into the center, and the center is energetically moving up. Your energetic awareness allows you to pull energy from the reservoir of vitality in the thighs and buttocks into the center and up through the spine. You'll also find that your attention is drawn to wherever your body needs it. Go ahead



and direct your energy wherever you feel the need. You can move energy and awareness into stiffness anywhere in the spine—into any stuck spot or cold, immobile place—until you feel light and warm from the inside out. You may even become creative in your movement. Sweep your arms down across the center and up overhead, or twist to one side. Then take this work into your asana, or sit down for pranayama practices or meditation.

Agni sara requires long-term training, and daily practice is a must. Early morning when the bowels and stomach are empty is the best time. You can also practice before meals, before bed, and during an asana routine. Start with 5–10 repetitions, or whatever is comfortable for your current level of strength and control. Build up to 40–50 repetitions at least once a day.

What next?

Agni sara will empower all of your postures by supporting the lumbar spine and integrating the legs and pelvis with the chest, neck, and head. You can bring this activation and alignment into a sitting posture by working with the hip balance pose.

Start sitting with the feet on the floor a few inches apart so the thighbones track directly out from the pelvis. Place your hands flat on the floor behind and near the pelvis (Fig. 7). Press the hands and feet into the floor and feel the spine lifting straight up from the pelvic floor. Lift up the front of the spine. Feel the perineum and the lower belly above the pubic bone moving in and up. This neutral position of the spine is maintained by the deep abdominal muscles that are engaged in agni sara. Keep the breath easy and unrestricted.

For a further challenge, lift one hand and then the other off the floor, bringing the hands behind the knees first, and finally alongside the legs without changing the alignment of the spine (Fig. 8). If you collapse and can't stay lifted, keep the hands on the floor and work on lifting more internally, gradually taking weight off the hands so the arms aren't propping up the torso. Keep your attention on the lower belly and maintain a smooth, even, effortless flow of breath. Soften the jaw and shoulders. Hold for 5 breaths, but don't exceed your capacity to hold the alignment. Repeat several times.

Then release the knees, take your sitting posture for meditation and pranayama—and notice the difference. Let go of effort, turn your awareness to the breath, and see how the breath is supported by the tone of the lower abdomen and pelvic floor. You're on your way to delightful meditations, successful pranayama, and vigor and stability in all aspects of life. ●

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