

## Sequencing for the Seasons

Creating sequences is a combination of creativity, intuition and how you can best meet the needs of your students on any given day.

Sequencing should be flexible, even intuitive, but it can also be repeated. We can repeat sequences with our students, because the more they practice the same movements the more they master them.

Sometimes you plan a sequence and then arrive to teach and the atmosphere in the room and the needs of the students is the complete opposite to what you had planned. That's when having more than one idea for a sequence can inspire spontaneity.

I love to create sequences for the different seasons as the way we feel in spring is very different to winter or summer. Having a variety of sequences for the different times of the year is a great addition to your teaching tool kit.

To sequence for each season, we'll use three main building blocks.

**The element**, which is dominant during the season,

**The ayurvedic dosha** or constitution we want to be aware of

**The chakra** which prevails during the season.

Before I dive into each sequence let's briefly review the quality of each element and the dosha and chakra it relates too

If you are not familiar with the chakras or the doshas I suggest learning more about each before you incorporate them into your sequence.

### **AIR**

Air is quick, light, dry and expansive. Air has no boundaries. Try and catch air, it's always moving.

In ayurveda the dosha that relates to air is VATA. Vata is made up of air and space. Space is unlimited and cannot be contained. We can't feel space. But we can feel air on our skin.

Skin is the organ for the element of air, and it relates to the sense of touch and the organ of action which is the hands.

The Chakra that relates to the element of air is the heart chakra. This is also our feeling centre. It where we experience compassion empathy, love, tenderness. When the heart chakra is open it is like a swinging door to intuition, creativity and speaking and expressing the truth. When the heart chakra is closed, feelings might be

surprised. There could be a tendency to withdraw from life. There could be feelings of loneliness or neediness.

## **Sequencing for Spring**

Spring is when the air element is most dominant. Balancing the air element which in turn balances Vata is a primary focus in sequencing for spring.

Imbalanced Vata characteristics may include changeability in the mind, feeling ungrounded, dry skin or constipation, anxiety, insomnia, difficulty gaining weight.

We also want to bring balance to our feeling life, the heart centre.

It is important to avoid excessive withdrawal in the chest area, such as maintaining stooped shoulders or a rounded upper torso. Conversely, over-expanding or excessively expressing the chest can lead to discomfort and muscular tightness behind the shoulders.

Creating a sequence for spring may include grounding postures, postures that slow us down and postures that balance the upper chest.

A breathing practice should calm the mind, we could include a mantra for the heart chakra, or an earth focused meditation.

Whatever is out of balance i.e. the air element. The postures you choose, the meditation and pranayama bring in the opposite element. For air, that's earth and water

Before we go through some examples of spring sequences:

Think about your own body and how you feel in springtime. Think about how the weather changes and how you change emotionally. How do you ground yourself in spring? What kinds of practices are you drawn to?

Rather than just doing a standard "spring sequence" plan from the inside out starting with the poses and postures that give you a personal experience of balance when you feel ungrounded or anxious. What postures for you promote calm and wellbeing.

Next, knowing the category of poses for the season and the ideal order of the poses, begin to sketch out a basic sequence.

For example, *tadasana* might be the base pose. In between flowing *asanas*, you bring the students back to *tadasana* to remind them that beyond the bursting leaves and flowers of spring they are as stable as a tree trunk.

Another classic earth element pose is chair pose, *utkatasana*. Chair pose also opens the chest and relates to the heart chakra

The classic seated equivalent to tadasana is staff pose, dandasana. In a seated sequence you could return the students to dandasana between each side.

Another basic pose to balance the air element is locust pose, salabasana. This brings the students to the floor and opens the chest which again relates to the heart. You could return to salabasana between postures

Finally, a posture like forward virasana (wide knees child's pose is also balancing for the air element. The body is close to the floor. This pose stretches the inner thighs which activates the water element (anything below the waist relates to water and earth) There is also a lengthening through the upper chest and spine in this pose.

The basic sequence is

Tadasana  
Utkatasana  
Dandasana  
Salabasana  
Adho Mukha Virasana

And all the postures in between return to those basic poses.

The tendency might be to think that springtime means lots of vinyasa and complicated sequencing with balances etc. This is creative; however, it can be more ungrounding. The more complicated the movements, the less stable we are overall. The idea is to go slow and steady. Vinyasa and creative vinyasa is wonderful in winter or late autumn when the air gets cool and we need more warmth. In Spring think calm and cool.

The ideal spring sequence includes:

Warmups

Cat and Cow

Vinyasa – Sun salutations done slowly with Ujjayi breath  
Sun salutations with Lunge

Standing postures like Tadasana, Trikonasana, Virabhadrasana 2, Parsvakonasana, Parsvotanasana, Padottanasana, Utkatasana, Pavritta Utkatasana

Vriksasana

Ardha bhujangasana, salabasana

Janu Sirsasana

Ardha matsyendrasana  
Bhaddhakonasana

Viparita Karani

Savasana.

Note to Akiko: As I go through the spring sequence, I'll explain why each pose balances the Air element.

For Pranayama you would want to explore either a calming Ujjayi breath or Alternate nostril breathing or lengthening the exhalation.

For meditation you could explore an earth-based meditation like the mountain meditation by John, Kabat Zinn. You could also do a meditation which is heart based like the Sat Yam Meditation. I can share links for that so you can learn it, or even just chanting the heart Bija mantra which is YAM.

## **FIRE**

The qualities of Fire are hot, sharp, spreading, transformative, Kinetic, catalytic, energetic. We see fire. It's a tangible element, we feel its effects in that it keeps us warm, it enables digestion and assimilation. Fire is also thought of as affecting thinking. The connections between neurons requires electricity or heat. In the same way that we rely on air to breathe we rely on heat for nourishment.

In Ayurveda the Dosha that relates to fire is Pitta. Pitta is the combination of fire and a small amount of water. When the fire meets the earth or anything it burns it releases moisture. For instance, when we get hot, we release sweat.

Pitta in the body is feeling overheated, rashes, a strong digestion which can also lead to ulcers if eating too many spicy foods. The pitta organs are small intestine, liver, gallbladder, stomach. Pittas emotionally are strong characters, they can get bossy, quick to anger. They like to be in control and organised. Pitta's have strong leadership qualities.

The chakra that relates to Fire is the Solar plexus and is called Manipura which means city of gems. Think of it like a hearth. If we burn the fire too quickly, we end up getting cold, if we don't stoke the fire enough or the wood is wet, we get smoke. When the fire burns efficiently the house stays warm for hours. The solar plexus is located at the xiphoid process where the diaphragm meets the ribcage. This area relates to our emotions and gut instinct. It also relates to Samana vayu. Turning food into fire for our energetic needs.

When we are out of balance in the solar plexus, emotions can run wild, we can experience burnout and feel out of control and experience frustration and anger. Blowing up at little things.

## **Sequence for Summer**

Fire is the predominant element in Summer, but for those of us in humid climates the water element is active too. When we think about sequencing for Summer its like Spring although the changeability isn't there. In summer it's a penetrating heat that doesn't let up. At least in Spring it can flip from cool to warm, or bring rain etc. In summer the body has less tolerance for change. Heat can be either dry or wet, but it's still heat. So, what we need is cooling and calming poses that also gently disperse the heat.

When you are thinking of your sequence, forward bending in all positions cools and calms the body, but also inner and outer thigh work which invokes the water element. So even combining forward bends with inner thigh stretches would work. Backbends on the belly, like salabhasana and dhanurasana connect with the 3<sup>rd</sup> chakra manipura. Bringing balance and support.

The best style for summer to teach is Yin or restorative yoga. But a student who comes to you for Vinyasa might not feel comfortable doing only Yin or restorative in summer, so the idea would be to incorporate Yin and restorative postures into your sequence. Maybe at the start or end of the practice or even in between more active standing postures.

Here are 4 basic Yin/ Restorative postures you could intersperse throughout the sequence to help the body cool and calm down.

1. Big toes together knees wide adho mukha virasana - this pose stretches both the inner thighs and calms the mind. You can start the class in this pose, have it in between standing and seated poses or after backbends to neutralise the spine
2. Star pose, Tarasana, this posture stretches behind the knees, is a gentle forward bend and sometimes easier to do than bhaddhakonasana. Its' also a pose you can add in the middle of the sequence or towards the end after forward bends
3. Saddle pose- Saddle pose is a backbend and front of thigh stretch which works with the Psoas muscle. You can teach it with variations. This is an amazing pose to calm the mind and works with the digestion including spleen, pancreas large and small intestine all fire organs. Bring this posture in at the end of backbends or after active inversions. It could also be the final posture in a sequence with bolsters etc.
4. Supported Bridge \_ setubhandha with block or bolster. This is a gentle inversion. Because we support the hips it's a water-based posture. There is also some activation of the Thyroid which regulates body temperature and metabolism. Both related to the fire element. You could start the class with this pose. Bring it in at the end of Backbends or have it as a final posture or just before viprati karani or shoulderstand.

Now that we have some basic yin poses to weave through our sequence. Here are some ideas for a summer sequence. Keeping in mind you want to start with your

own experience. What postures cool you down in summer? Can you approach your practice in a different way. Maybe slowing down your ujjayi in the practice. Or exploring full complete breath in every pose.

Start the sequence with a calming pranayama like Nadishodhana, or lengthening the exhalation. You could even start full complete breath on the back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

You could also start the practice with a calming mantra like Sham or Ram to balance the heart fire or emotions.

After Pranayama

You could begin the sequence with either

Legs up the wall ( Viparita Karani)

Forward Virasana ( big toes together knees wide)

Or a yin stretch for the feet like Zazen pose ( I'll demonstrate this)

Cat cow

Cat seal ( I'll demo this)

Longer holds of Down Dog, maybe even supported down dog with a block)

Uttanasana

Tadasana

Sun salutation with lunges

Childs pose

Lizard pose

Parsvakonasana

Parvottanasana

Paddottasana

Vriksasana

Uttanasana

Pigeon pose to stretch outer hip and cool down

Salabhasana

Dhanurasana

Saddle pose

Forward Virasana

Marchyasana 1 and 3

Janu Sirsasana

Parvritta Janusirsasana

Bhaddokonasana

Tarasana

Upavista Konasana

Setubhanda ( if you didn't do it at the start)

Shoulderstand ( if you didn't do Viparita Karani at the start)

Maltese twist ( supine twist)

Savasasana

We might finish the practice with cooling breath like Sitali, and a meditation using visualisation. It's also nice to finish with the mantra Ram either as an internal chant lying down or sitting upright. Summer is about softening the emotions and surrendering the heart to joy and celebration without pushing ourselves. So, whatever that means to you as a yoga teacher you can bring that in. It might be in dedicating your practice to something greater than oneself. Or the playlist you choose. Bring in an element of Bhakti Yoga which is that quality of devotion.

## WATER

Water is active during all the season, but for our purposes we will focus on balancing the water element in Autumn. In the southern hemisphere the rainy season starts at the end of Summer. In the Northern Hemisphere as things become cooler there may be a mixture of rain, wind and a drying component. Think of fall like spring, it's changeable. Sometimes warm, sometimes wet, sometimes dry and cold. Fall is a time for a well-rounded approach which focuses on the stirrings of the unconscious as we descend into winter. Like Persephone diving into the underworld.

Water is mobile, fluid, mutable, smooth, clear, nourishing, wet, purifying  
The Doshas associated with water are both Pitta and Kapha. Pitta /kapha energy is grounded, nurturing, peaceful, supportive, loving, focused, reliable, creative, organised, works diligently and over time gets things done. Physically the Pitta, Kapha types can get overheated, sweat a lot, have slow digestion, can overwork and get burnt out, can have both slow and hot digestion. Can have skin issues and excess fluid in the system like edema etc. May get colds often.

The chakra that relates to water is Svadhistana. Which means centred in self. This chakra relates to creativity, sexuality, relationships, likes and dislikes and the pelvis. Maintaining equilibrium in the pelvis, as well as the related muscles and connective tissues, can help achieve balance when individuals become excessively focused on their desires. Thinking we have to do something to get something. A balanced water element and 2<sup>nd</sup> chakra is about being able to go with the flow, surrendering when appropriate and feeling our own value and self-worth.

## **Sequence for Autumn**

Amidst the ebbing and flowing of Autumn we want to specifically focus on standing balancing poses, grounding postures and postures that open the hips and inner thighs.

Here are a few basic postures you want to include

Low and high lunge accesses the psoas and groin muscles and works asymmetrically to develop balance

Virabhadrasana 2 – an inner thigh opener which also strengthens the thighs and supports the knee

Tree Pose- Vriksasana a balancing inner thigh opener and calming for the mind

Bhaddha konasana – inner thigh opener can be done seated or as a restorative pose

Brahmasana ( outer hip opener) this has many variations depending on hip flexibility

Upavistakonasana strong inner thigh opener

## **Autumn Sequence**

Sukasana forward stretch to open inner thighs

Cat cow

Tiger pose for balance

Down Dog to low Lunges

Uttanasana

Sun salutations with Lunge

Virabhadrasana 2, Parsvakonasana



Trikonasa to Ardha Chandrasana

Parsvottanasana to Virabhadrasana 3

Hasta Padhangustasana

Vriksasana

Sun salutation to down Dog

Pidegon Pose

Brahmasana variations

Bhaddha Konasana

Upavista Konasana

Virasana

Forward virasana

Reclining hasta padhangustasana

Reclining twists

Savasana

To invoke Balance in Autumn through pranayama we can work with Nadishodhana and Ujjayi pranayama. So Ham meditation and the swaying meditation.

## **Earth**

In Winter the predominant element is earth. Think of how the air changes in winter. It's cold, dry and crisp. Think how water turns to ice. There is a hard cold and dry quality to winter. Earth is stable, but earth is also hidden. We take earth for granted. It also holds the seeds and potential for spring. Trees are bare. Earth is dark, structure, immutable, solid, damp, heavy.

The dosha that relates to earth is Kapha. Kapha is made up of Earth and Water. Kapha's are usually a bigger body type and more sedentary. Kapha is loving, patient, accepting, dependable, gets the job done slowly but surely. Physically they put on weight, find it hard to lose weight, have damp skin, sluggish stools, a slow digestion. They have flexibility in their joints and can be hypermobile. They have a strong immune system, emotionally they get depressed and find it hard to let go. The Kapha organs are the lungs, upper part of stomach, pancreas, joints. Kapha qualities are slow, sweet, oily and slimy.

The chakra that relates to the Earth element is Muladhara. Muladhara is heritage, family, stability, memory, foundation, material wealth, abundance. When muladhara is out of balance we can feel ungrounded, have anxiety and insomnia. A balanced Muladhara balances Vata. Muladhara relates to the pelvic floor, the legs and the feet.

Even though in winter Kapha is predominant, there's some Vata active too. That's the cold, dry aspect. Knowing this will help us to create our sequence. That we want to balance Kapha and Vata.

## **Sequence for Winter**

To adequately build a sequence for winter we want to balance the cold, dry qualities with the sedentary slow qualities. We want to make sure there is a balance between fire and air. If there is too much fire the air will in the system will increase. So, it's about building heat and then letting that heat disperse throughout the body in a way that sustains it over time.

Take a moment to think about how you feel in your own body in winter. Are you cold, does your skin get dry, do you feel sluggish, is it hard to get out of bed? In winter we need stimulation. Practices that warm us up are ideal. This is where vinyasa, arm balances, and active inversions are perfect. But we also want to avoid feeling over expanded or ungrounded, so we want to balance our active postures with twists to help distribute the heat and work with the fire organs.

Let's start with 5 heat building short vinyasa practices you can use anywhere in the practice

1. Inhale Up Cat  
Exhale Down Cat  
Inhale Up Cat  
Exhale Child's pose  
Inhale rise onto the knees raise the arms and brings the palms to touch  
Exhale lower back to child's pose heels to the buttocks first,  
then forehead to the floor
2. Start in child's pose  
Inhale lower the forearms and slide the chest through the hands to Baby  
Cobra  
Exhale child's pose
3. Inhale Up Cat  
Exhale lower to modified Chaturanga  
Inhale Cat pose  
Exhale Childs pose
4. Inhale Up Cat

Exhale modified Chaturanga all the way to the floor  
 Inhale Baby Cobra  
 Exhale Child's pose  
 Inhale Bali Seal  
 Exhale Sit the buttocks on the heels with toes tucked under  
 Inhale low lunge arms extended overhead  
 Exhale hands either side of front foot back knee extended Inhale  
 Step front leg back to Plank pose  
 Exhale Down Dog  
 Inhale Up Cat  
 Repeat on other side and step other leg forward for low lunge

#### 5. Moving Table

Inhale raise pelvis  
 Exhale lower pelvis

These short vinyasa sequence can be joined together before more vigorous Sun salutations or you can intersperse them between Sun Salutations, or bring them in between standing postures.

Heres a sample sequence you might like to expand on

Inhale Up Cat  
 Exhale Down Cat  
 Inhale Up Cat  
 Exhale Child's pose  
 Inhale rise onto the knees raise the arms and brings the palms to touch  
 Exhale lower back to child's pose heels to the buttocks first,  
 then forehead to the floor

Down Dog with cat or plank in between  
 Step to Uttanasana  
 Uttanasana to Utkatasana with repetitions  
 Step to Down Dog  
 Inhale lower the forearms and slide the chest through the hands to Baby Cobra  
 Exhale child's pose  
 Down Dog to Uttanasana Utkatasana  
 Sun Salutations with Lunge and Vira one  
 At the end of the last vinyasa come from chaturanga into Updog and back to Down Dog, child's pose

Inhale Up Cat  
 Exhale lower to modified Chaturanga  
 Inhale Cat pose  
 Exhale Child's pose

Inhale Down Dog

Step through into Standing postures of all kinds with Vinyasa in between  
Vira 2, Parsvakonasana, Pavritta parsvakonasana Trikonasana, Pavritta Trikonasana  
Parsvottanasana, padottanasna, Goddess pose

Finish standing poses with Garudasana, or hasta padangustasana

Vinyasa to cat pose

Inhale Up Cat

Exhale modified Chaturanga all the way to the floor

Inhale Baby Cobra

Exhale Child's pos

Inhale Bali Seal

Exhale Sit the buttocks on the heels with toes tucked under

Inhale low lunge arms extended overhead

Exhale hands either side of front foot back knee extended Inhale

Step front leg back to Plank pose

Exhale Down Dog

Inhale Up Cat

Repeat on other side and step other leg forward for low lunge

Come into malasana ( garland pose)

Bakasana

Pavritta Bakasana

Tittabasana

All with jump backs in between

Handstand at the wall or centre of the room

Uttanasana

Vinyasa to chaturanga finishing on the belly

Salabasana

Bhujangasana

Wheel pose

Happy Baby

Big toes together knees wide

Twisting postures to choos from you can still do vinyasa in between

Ardha Matsyendrasana

Marichyasana variations

Ardha phada paschimottasana twists

Ardha Janusirsasana

Pasasana

Moving table

Pashimottasana

Sarvangasana with variations

Setubhanda

Savasana

The winter sequence is fast paced with lots of postures; the breath should be steady using Ujjayi to keep the mind calm and focused. Emphasise the earth element in each posture focusing on the power in the legs and feet. The backbends and upper body work is about keeping the breath open, supporting lung energy for this kapha time of year.

You can use breath practices like Bhastrika and Kapalabhati

Meditations can be focused on the 3<sup>rd</sup> eye, or chanting AUM

If there is any Vata disturbance you can chant the mantra LAM

A guided visualisation is also supportive in winter or even a Yoga Nidra making sure everyone is warm

Conclusion

When sequencing for the seasons, there are many factors to consider. Gaining a deeper understanding of the active elements, the associated dosha, and the dominant chakra will help you plan creative and inspiring sessions. As mentioned earlier, the key is to remain flexible: have a plan but be ready to improvise. For example, a rainy day in spring is quite different from a rainy day in autumn. In spring, there might be more wind, while in autumn it could be cooler. A rainy day in autumn might call for more heating postures alongside water-balancing poses, whereas a rainy, windy spring day would benefit from grounding postures to balance Vata. Think of your starting sequence as a blueprint and then expand according to your own experiences, the time of year, the time, day and inner weather of the group. If you work in this way, you'll students will feel inspired, grounded and ready for more.