



# Align Your Cues

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*Common Yoga Cues Reconsidered*



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# Prologue:

## Maximizing the value of this guide

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What is this guide's goal? The creation of this guide stems from an underlying assumption that there are alignment goals worth striving for within each yoga asana, referred to as Fundamental Alignment Intentions throughout this guide. With this in mind, our intention is to create and support postures that embrace and honor inherent physiology, bone structure, and anatomically informed movement.

# The Wild Value of Cues

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Our bodies are magnificent, and they are created to be adaptable. This means they will compensate when they are “asked” to, even if that “request” could potentially lead to harm in the present or future. Tons of cues used in yoga classes have been passed down and just keep making the rounds, and while born out of a genuine desire to be helpful, they don’t always succeed. Cues that don’t consider our bodies’ natural qualities and individual differences may accidentally perpetuate the very actions or forms they are meant to address. Instead of using a cue just because it exists, it’s worth examining it closer. Creating awareness of the cues we use allows us to avoid common compensations that don’t contribute to alignment intentions and posture ideals within asanas.

# What Makes an Ideal Cue?

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At its core, an ideal cue is an invitation. It invites an individual into an experience of beneficial and advantageous movement centered on principles of movement science, core concepts in yoga, and anatomical realities. An ideal cue works toward enhancing balance and honoring alignment, while simultaneously taking into account the diversity inherent in bone structure and anatomy.

*"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."* - Maya Angelou

# Informing Your Cues

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Incorporating a deepened understanding of the variables at work within various postures can inspire change in existing patterns of movement. Equipped with knowledge, we can revisit habits and assumptions and rethink posture priorities. Informed cues support safe strengthening and help avoid overuse or injury. Most importantly, improved cues facilitate attention to the clues our own body will provide us if we know what to look and feel for.

*If you find you have adopted some of the cue's below; don't stress. Now is the perfect time to discover fresh cue's that take the uniqueness of every'body' into account.*

# Easily Misconstrued Cue #1

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**“When the arms are overhead, pull the shoulders back and down.”**

# Cue #1 Considerations:

Shoulders are complex, and so are their movements. They are hypermobile, and unlike hips, they have minor bone protection. That means they are especially vulnerable. To protect them, ideal alignment is crucial. The concern with Cue #1 is that it potentially asks the body to move counterintuitively and against the anatomical principles at play. When the arms are lifted or become elevated, the shoulder blades naturally rotate upward. This rotation is an essential movement within the scapulohumeral rhythm required for shoulder congruence and stability.

A frequent response to Cue #1 is an attempt to lower the outer edge of the shoulder with a downward motion. The largest muscles in the upper body, the lats (latissimus dorsi), usually supply the strength for this effort. Bringing the lat muscles into action in an effort to alter the position of the shoulder muscles nearly always results in the lats overpowering the much smaller and more diminutive shoulder muscles. This muscular domination stops the correct rotation, thus disrupting the scapulohumeral rhythm.

Unintended consequences of pulling the shoulders back and down when the arms are overhead may include: contradiction of the anatomical function of the shoulder structure, limitation of the arms' elevation potential, and the possible aggravation of the rotator cuff muscle. In other words, the lat muscles' interference with the lift initiated by the rotator cuff can result in strain and the formation of less-than-ideal habits, which can then create limitations and further concerns in weight-bearing poses with arms overhead, e.g., handstands.

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# Cue #1 Fundamental Alignment Intention: *Ideal Stability*

Ideal stability, otherwise known as anatomical congruence, supplies natural support for the body. When reaching up, the shoulder blades should lift in order to extend our reach (think: grabbing something off the top shelf). This is the anatomically correct action. Ideal stability/anatomical congruence is achieved when joint placement is optimally aligned, allowing the joint to bear weight as it was designed to do. Stability is crucial for injury prevention, increasing stamina, and improving balance. An additional advantage of working for ideal shoulder stability is that stacking your joints and bones will help you work smarter instead of harder in poses!

# Cue #1

## Visualize: What constitutes arms overhead?

- Arms are at 90 degrees when they are laterally extended from the torso in a T-shape.
- Arms are above 90 degrees when they reach up beyond that T.

*Note: It is important to note that any motion above that T of 90 degrees may be referenced as “arms alongside your ears,” “arms in the overhead plane,” “arms overhead,” and others.*

# Poses Influenced by Cue #1

— THIS CUE MAY BE APPLIED IN THESE POPULAR  
POSES WHERE ARMS ARE IN THE OVERHEAD PLANE.

## POSES

- Virabhadrasana I & III - Warrior I & III
- Utkatasana - Chair
- *Any standing pose where the arms overhead*

DON'T FORGET ARMS ARE ALSO OVERHEAD IN  
THESE POSES:

- Adho Mukha Svanasana - Downward Facing Dog
  - Explore *Downdog shoulders made easy*
- Balasana - Child's Pose (when arms are forward)
- Urdhva Dhanurasana - Wheel
- Sirsasana - Headstand
- Pincha Mayurasana - Forearm stand
- Adho Mukha Vrksasana - Handstand

# Cue #1 Reorientation Suggestion

To facilitate ideal stability and to counteract the significant tension that many hold in their necks, advise yourself or others to modify applicable poses.

- **Advise modification #1:** Keep arms down at side.
  - Modification #1 pro tip: My favorite modification when experiencing neck discomfort is to have your arms by your side and slightly back, actively squeezing the shoulder blades together while driving the fingertips toward the floor. This modification counterbalances the tension in the shoulders/neck by creating flow in the opposite direction.
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- **Advise modification #2:** Focus on reaching up through the arms while simultaneously keeping the neck muscles relaxed rather than rolling shoulders back and down.



# Tips for Cue #1

*One way to formulate informed cues is to include a balancing aspect and explain the anatomical basis for suggested movements and/or pose alterations. Do your best to steer clear of one-liners that may sound neat and tidy but oftentimes skip anatomical realities that can potentially create postures where harm can easily happen.*

# Easily Misconstrued Cue #2

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**“Tuck the tailbone.”**

# Cue #2 Considerations:

The body rarely rewards intentional tucking movements and, therefore, they're rarely advised in yoga. The spine showcases four natural curves: cervical (neck), thoracic (upper back), lumbar (lower back), and sacral (tailbone). Our spine is built to bear weight and absorb considerable impact as we walk, jump, run, and more. Its curved design is what enables the spine to do this successfully. Therefore, we want—and need—our spinal curves functional and intact.

When our essential spinal curves are not mindfully maintained in your daily life and yoga practice, they can begin to flatten. Over time it is possible to lose touch with our instinctive movement and, thus, muscular engagement while maintaining a neutral spine. Once upon a time “tucking the tail” was thought to actively engage core muscles and correspondingly protect the lower back. Science has established that this is not the case; rather the undesirable creation of gaps between vertebrae—referred to as “gapping”—may become an increased risk when the bottom is pushed out and back (think chair pose) and then layered with a tucking action.

As such, applying this cue indiscriminately can diminish natural and necessary spinal curvature. This in turn weakens inherent spine strength, potentially creating conditions that facilitate injuries and contributing to conditions that create back pain.

# Cue #2 Fundamental Alignment Intention: *Neutral Spine*

A neutral spine is one in which the four curves remain in their natural position. “Tuck your tail” is often cued to achieve what is anatomically referred to as an anterior tilt. This is an exaggerated lumbar curve that visually results in a bum exaggeratedly sticking out. A neutral spine cannot be realized in movements that unnaturally deepen the lumbar curve, a lordotic or inward curve, through an anterior tilt. Likewise, neutrality can not be achieved through undue opposite action or overcorrection, known as a posterior tilt of the pelvis. Allowing a spine to remain in neutral position is fostered by maintaining the spine’s natural curves without either exaggerating or diminishing them.



# Cue #2

## A Closer Look: Contributors to tucking

Once we realize the value of a neutral spine, it pays to safely and effectively bring attention to any underlying issues that could interfere with neutrality. This approach steers clear of overcorrecting or miscorrecting based on visuals alone. As such, we must distinguish between actively tucking and a posture that includes a natural tuck due to muscular tightness.

- Manage active tucking by centering awareness on movement and mindfully reverting to a position of spine neutrality.
- Address tucking that results from hip flexor and other muscle tightness that may be holding the pelvis in a tucked position with a thorough consideration of postural habits and a strategic intervention to conscientiously address these.

# Cue #2

## Postural Factors that Influence Your Pelvis

Extensive periods of sitting can strongly influence your pelvis. A slouched sitting position can weaken the gluteal and hamstring muscles over time. When these muscles are underused, the lower torso and top of the thigh muscles tighten, which in turn causes the hip flexors to shorten. In this scenario, shortened hip flexors alongside weakened glutes contribute to the pelvis being “stuck” in a tucked position.

Unfortunately, there’s no quick fix for such posture issues. Counteracting established tightness requires time, effort, and potentially even lifestyle changes. If you think muscular tightness may be affecting your yoga practice and/or posture, please see a physical therapist or movement specialist. Change is absolutely possible and worth pursuing. Assistance from a qualified professional will help ensure you receive a thorough assessment and targeted exercises to safely restore balance and enhance mobility.

# Cue #2

## Visualize: A Tucked Pelvis

- Your tail is “tucked” when the tailbone draws under the body and the lumbar curve is lost (posterior tilt).
- Your tail is “sticking out” when your tailbone lifts and your lumbar curve becomes exaggerated (anterior tilt).

*Note: Tucking may also be encouraged on the mat through verbal cues such as “scoop your tail,” “drop your sacrum,” or “draw your belly to your spine and move the top of your hips backwards.”*

# Poses Influenced by Cue #2

— THIS CUE OFTEN COMES OUT TO PLAY DURING THESE POPULAR POSES WHERE THE BUM MAY APPEAR TO BE OVERLY 'STICKING-OUT'.

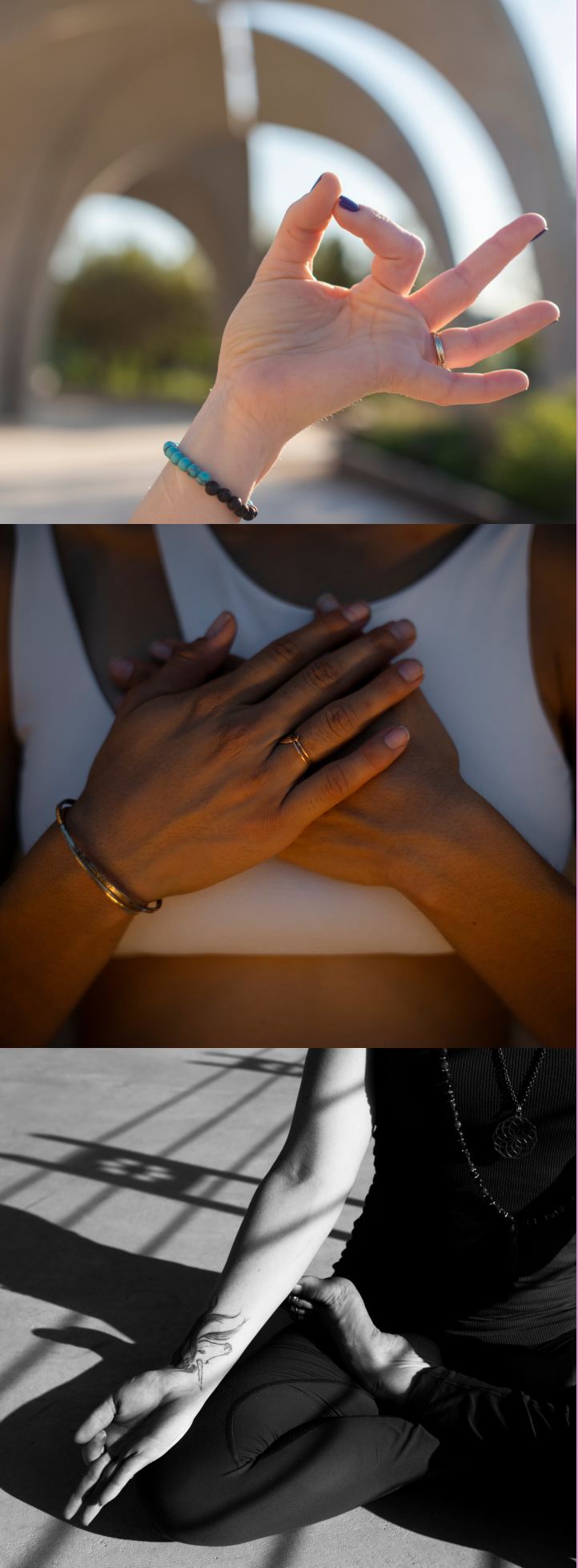
## POSES

- Tadasana - Mountain
- Utkatasana - Chair
- Garudasana - Eagle

# Cue #2 Reorientation Suggestion

In order to facilitate a neutral spine, incorporate a balancing element. This will assist in achieving the actions of the pose and allow for sustainable, healthy movement. The following suggestions work to counterbalance tightness and resist compensations people with muscular weakness or “stuck” hip flexors often rely on.

- **Advise modification #1:** Lengthen the tailbone down while mindfully maintaining your lumbar curve.
- **Advise modification #2:** As you draw your pubic bone up towards your navel actively keep the natural curves of your spine.
- **Advise modification #3:** Focus on and feel for the interplay between the pubic bone and tailbone and seek a place of balance. (Note that tucking and lifting exercises may prove helpful for raising awareness of what to feel before implementing or teaching this cue.)



# Tips for Cue #2

*Remember that the human body is three-dimensional, and cues involving the pelvis can address both the front and the back. For example, if the lower back is overarched in chair pose, Modification #1 is of value precisely because it draws attention to the three-dimensional qualities inherent in the pelvis. Acknowledging these allows for more cueing options in this pose, such as “Lift the front of the hips away from the top of the thighs until you no longer feel an excessive arch.” Employing creativity with cues has a big impact on how we connect with our bodies and facilitate a new approach to movement for students who struggle in some positions.*

# Easily Misconstrued Cue #3

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**“Square the hips to the long side  
of your mat”**

*Note: This cue is most often used in poses like Warrior II, Triangle, Side Angle and Half Moon, and you may hear it expressed in variations such as “Open the back of the hip to the long side of your mat and place the back foot parallel with the back of the mat,” or “Try to position your body as if it was between two panes of glass.”*

# Cue #3 Considerations:

When a movement requires a sudden change of direction (i.e. a turn), the following takes place: the top of the thigh bone of the leg that initiates the turn “catches” within the pelvic girdle, and the pelvis is brought into the turn. In other words, the head of the femur engages with the pelvis throughout turning motions in order to facilitate the inclusion of the pelvis and upper body. This inherent hip design is potentially overlooked by this cue, which may result in frustration. Don't be fooled should an exceedingly flexible person create an illusion of squared hips.



# Cue #3 Considerations Continued:

*Anatomically speaking, it is simply not physically possible to “square the hips.” Here’s why:*

- A stacked front knee brings the back hip forward. The back hip then brings the back knee forward. A twist then occurs between the knee and foot. In order to avoid and relieve the unwanted twist, the back foot has to move forward. This action visually “unsquares” the hip and eliminates the foot positioning directive of the cue. (It is, however, anatomically correct and safer.)
- Efforts to “square the hips to the long side of the mat” make the front knee shift inward, thus moving the front leg out of alignment. Any attempt to “fix” the knee or solve this by returning the knee to a stacked position then causes the back hip to turn forward—thus automatically “unsquaring” it.

# Cue #3

## Natural Joint Action

Natural joint action of hip and pelvis design means that some form of wrapping (i.e. unsquaring) will always be necessary. Keep in mind that the extent of the required wrapping action is determined by individual flexibility. This is natural and deserves to be honored. Contradictory attempts to square the hips can lead to undesired torque on the joints. Torque is linked with joint degradation and weakened hip stability—factors associated with increased risk of back and knee injury. Embracing and emphasizing anatomically realistic positioning builds flexibility and strength while protecting joints and muscles.

# Correct Positioning for Externally Rotated Poses:

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**Honoring positioning is made anatomically possible through a series of individualized accommodations:**

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1. Begin with the front knee. Ideally position it over the second or third toe.
2. Acknowledge that when the front leg and hip are in external rotation, the back hip will need to rotate/wrap forward to some degree. Allow it to do so. Accept that each individual's hip will need to turn forward to a different degree.
3. Understand that as the back hip rotates forward, the back knee will also rotate forward. Allow it to do so. At this point, efforts to maintain your back foot parallel to the back of the mat will cause a twist between the knee and foot. Avoid forcing the back foot to a parallel position as the knee is a hinge joint (think a door that swings forward and back), and hinge joints aren't designed to twist.
4. Reposition the back foot with a deliberate action, such as turning the back foot slightly in and forward (as opposed to keeping it parallel).
5. Find a personal sweet spot by catering to individualized flexibility. When repositioning the back foot, consider aiming to keep the knee in line with the second and third toe.
6. Most importantly, this is not about moving the back hip forward. Instead focus on aligning the front leg correctly and allowing the back hip to do what it does. When you allow the legs to lead the movement of the pelvis, anatomically correct pelvic movements follow.

# Cue #3 Fundamental Alignment Intention: *Anatomically Led Movement*

For our purposes, try to keep in mind the ideal partnership that joins safe movement at the upper end of your unique range of motion while still maintaining an accompanying sense of stability. For instance, avoid seeking a maximum extension in order to simply “hang out” there. Placing yourself near the limit of a joint's full potential for movement is risky as maximum extension places you closer to movements that could cause injury. Embracing safer positions within your current range of motion lends itself to enhanced stability and balance, which protect and build strength. Say “no” to floppy and “yes” to intentionally structured, anatomically neutral positioning and cues that facilitate them.

# Cue #3

## Visualize: What Constitutes External Rotation?

- A motion away from the body where the pelvis faces out, opens, or rotates away from the center of the body demonstrates external rotation. For example, when stepping into Warrior II from Mountain Pose, a step back with the left leg causes the pelvis to open and rotate away from the front leg. This demonstrates a front leg in external rotation.

*External Rotation Definition: Movement of a joint, around its long axis, away from the mid-line of the body.(1)*

*1. Source - <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/external+rotation>*

# Poses Influenced by Cue #3

— THIS CUE MAY BE APPLIED IN THESE EXTERNALLY ROTATED POSES.

## POSES

- Trikonasana - Triangle
- Virabhadrasana II - Warrior II
- Parsvakonasana - Side Angle
- Ardha Chandrasana - Half Moon
- Vrksasana - Tree Pose
- Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana B - Extended Hand to Foot B

## DON'T FORGET THESE ADDITIONAL POSES

- Vasisthasana B - Side Plank B
- Supta Padangusthasana B - Reclining Hand to Foot B
- Eka Pada Koundinyasana II - Flying Splits Pose

# Cue #3 Reorientation Suggestion

Counter pre-existing knowledge gaps or misunderstandings by inviting individuals to sense and feel the difference of correct front leg positioning and the enhanced stability and ease it provides.

- **Invitation #1:** Turn the rib cage and the navel toward the side of the mat even as the back hip wraps forward, honoring the inherent twist intended in this pose.
- **Invitation #2:** Counter what you may have been taught: It's important to understand that you don't have to force the back hip open. Rather, allow it to do what it does naturally when the front leg is positioned correctly.
- **Invitation #3:** As your front knee aligns over your ankle, you may notice your back hip wrapping toward the front of your mat. This is completely normal.

*Example: In Warrior II or Triangle, turn the rib cage and the navel toward the long side of the mat even as the hips wrap forward. This modification stays true to the inherent twist/flow in this pose while honoring bone structure and intended function.*



# Tips for Cue #3

*Focus on empowerment! Remind individuals that just because certain cues are often used, it doesn't make them informed or ideal. They do not need to force their hips square or imagine their body between two panes of glass.*





# Full Circle Concepts: What are We Seeking?

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Tadasana, or Mountain Pose, is a foundational asana and overarching concept from which others flow. It mimics the anatomically neutral position of a skeleton standing erect with palms facing forward and is the reference point from which all movement terminology (spinal flexion, hip extension, etc.) flows. Yoga always emphasizes one or more elements in each posture that draw back toward a neutral position, meaning there is always movement accompanied by action in the opposite direction for balance—think push and pull or Sthira (effort) and Sukha (ease). This search for balance applies across the broad movement spectrum, from the most basic daily movement patterns to the most extreme contortions. Thus, what Tadasana teaches us about balance and neutrality are principles applicable in every pose practiced. Keep those principles firmly in mind as you continue evaluating all cues that come your way.

# Cue Check-In

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The intention behind a closer examination of these three cues is to stimulate thought and create awareness. Learning more about anatomy and kinesiology (the science of movement) allows for a solid foundation on which you can build your personal yoga practice or formulate your approach to teaching yoga professionally. Understanding central constructs in these areas works naturally to honor alignment and redirect when necessary.

This is not an arena for hard and fast universal rules. Paying attention to the signs your body provides you is always a safe place to start. Listen to and learn how to feel your body's feedback—let it inform your choices, and allow your body's happiness to confirm them. Prioritizing personal anatomical realities and differences allows for freedom within asanas and increases the safety of challenging physical positioning.

# Disclaimer:

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Don't replace dogma with dogma. Attuning ourselves to our body's wisdom is a lifelong process. Learning as life happens and our body's needs change never stops. Investing in education and supporting an environment where others can feel empowered to do the same may feel more challenging at times than simply pulling a well-worn cue out of your hat. However, your body and those of the students you may teach will be grateful for your consideration.

***Thank you for reading!***



# Curious to Learn More?

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My structured program, Basics Are the New Advanced, centers around reexamining movement. Personalized, yet with wide-ranging implications, it is an advantageous and natural next step for those looking to enhance their practice and add to their knowledge base as practitioners or professionals of yoga.

Enrich & Expand your Practice. *Browse our Blog*

*Embark on the next step of your journey - contact me with questions or to learn more today.*



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# About Lana Reed

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