

Relax,

*take a deep breath...
and do the downward-facing dog*

by Kerry Jordan



A couple of years ago, I have to admit I would have scoffed at dog yoga. Sometimes called “doga,” dog yoga is the latest trend among many health-conscious canine guardians, and is growing in popularity, with classes being held in parks and gyms across the country. But I was a “serious” yogi – a “real” yoga instructor.

Alice changed all that. She was eight weeks old when I adopted her from the MSPCA. She was a tiny brindle bundle of love and energy...*lots* of energy. She wanted to play and run all the time. Everything was new and exciting and she didn’t want to miss a single moment of fun.

Nothing was more fascinating to Alice than my yoga mat and the weird stuff I did on it. This was a game she could get into. She leaped into my lap and licked my nose while I meditated. She nibbled on my toes in warrior one. She knocked over my tree

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pose. She wriggled beneath my downward-facing dog and writhed on her back until I started laughing.

Alice and I played our yoga game more and more often. I noticed that when I included her in my practice we both enjoyed it a lot more. She wasn't so demanding and I wasn't irritated when my yoga wasn't perfect. We taught each other how to chill out. My home practice has never been the same since.

Yoga is designed to unite mind, body and breath. It increases strength and flexibility, reduces stress, and improves immune system function. As Alice taught me, your dog already does yoga every single day. She revels in every movement and breathes fully and deeply. She can relax at the drop of a hat and knows how to surrender herself completely to joy. You can learn a lot from your dog!

When I sheepishly asked my dog trainer, Jenifer Vickery of The Pawsitive Dog, what she thought about doing yoga with dogs, she told me that she not only considers it a great way to relax, but that it has the potential to be a valuable training tool. Jenifer invited Alice and I to teach dog yoga workshops at The Pawsitive Dog, and we've never looked back.

We're not alone. Many gyms and yoga studios, such as Crunch Fitness, also offer yoga classes for humans and their canine companions. Crunch's classes are held outdoors during nice weather, in parks from Chicago and New York to San Francisco and Los Angeles. There have even been a few books recently published on the topic, including *Doga: Yoga for Dogs* by Jennifer Brilliant, and *Yoga for Pets and the People Who Love Them* by Bruce Van Horn.

What can you and your best friend expect at a dog yoga class? Curriculums vary, but the workshops that Alice and I now teach to groups and individuals begin with some basic yogic philosophy and comparative anatomy. Then, working from head to tail, students learn a routine of yoga postures for humans and stretches and massage for canines – including neck stretches, downward and upward dog poses, and the cat stretch. We close with a guided relaxation, while we lie on the floor holding and petting our dogs. By the end of the workshop, each participant has learned a quick, simple practice they can do at home to de-stress and connect with their canine.



Caroline Crescenzi



and her Puli, Breeze, were a little unsure about yoga at first. "Breeze and I aren't really athletic. We definitely prefer lounging to running. But we have attended several classes together and it's been a good experience. It's a great bonding opportunity that is relaxing for both of us. She loves the attention, tummy rubbing and stretching. One tangible benefit has been in my getting access to her paws, a previously off limits area."

People who want to attend a dog yoga class should have animals that are well-socialized and able to follow basic obedience commands. Since the focus is on relaxation, the classes are gentle enough for people and dogs of all ages and abilities.

You might still be wondering if dogs really benefit from doing yoga with their people, and vice versa. Absolutely. Both exercise and training are a lot more effective when they are fun. Yoga not only enhances the fitness levels of you and your dog, but it also provides valuable training practice. Best of all, perhaps, it profoundly deepens the bond you share with your canine companion, and encourages healing relaxation. Remember...relaxed dogs make good dogs, and relaxed people make good guardians.

KERRY JORDAN IS THE CO-OWNER AND DIRECTOR OF THE BLISSFUL MONKEY YOGA STUDIO (WWW.BLISSFULMONKEY.COM) IN JAMAICA PLAIN, MASSACHUSETTS.

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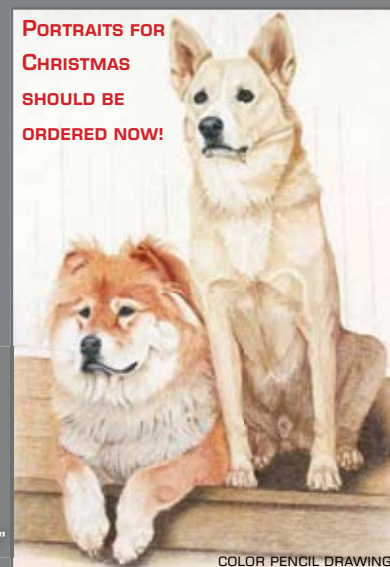
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