

Yoga on the Bike

Angus Whyte

Skyterra Article

Yoga Principles in Action

Doing yoga on the bike is easy. Let's start with triangle pose—*Trikonasana* in Sanskrit—and go from there. First, find a downhill stretch of road that's clear of debris and free of cars. Bring yourself up to a nice brisk pace, say about 25 mph. Take your right foot off the pedal and place it on the top tube. Then take your left foot off the other pedal and place it in the center of your handlebars. In one smooth motion, let go of the bars, push yourself up and hop into a position with your right foot on the seat and your left foot at a 90 degree angle on the handlebars. Extend your arms out to the side, then side bend over to the left and place your left hand on your left foot. Be sure to keep your spine long, and....

...did I get you?

Jokes! I've got jokes. Please, whatever you do, never, ever try doing triangle pose on a moving bike. Unless, of course, you're a circus performer. If you can do what I just described, then I know some people up at Cirque du Soleil in Montreal who'd love to talk to you. If you're like the rest of us mortals, then read on.

It's possible you've heard of combining yoga with cycling—it's certainly not an original concept. I've seen indoor cycling instructors incorporate modified upper body yoga postures as part of their on-bike warm-up, during the recovery period between interval sets, and as part of their on-bike cool-down as they're winding down the training session.

That's not what I'm going to talk about, either.

I'm going to talk about how you can use the fundamental alignment principles found in yoga while you ride your bicycle. I won't be teaching you how to add a yoga pose to your cycling, but rather, how you can use the physical concepts you learn in a yoga class—or from this article—while you're actively riding your bike. You'll be able to use the information here no matter what kind of cycling you do: you can be an amateur road racer, a mountain biker, a triathlete, a commuter, or you may simply love spinning down a bike path on a single speed cruiser when you're at the beach. The ideas I'll present are versatile and apply equally well to any and all types of cycling. You can use them if you're a baggy-short roller or one of the serious, spandex-clad hammerheads. Best of all, you can use them if you're like most people, and fall somewhere in between those two extremes. And you can use them right away, as in the next time you go for a ride.

The One Key Thing

Relax.

If you remember only one thing from this article, remember to relax. That's the first and most important idea to transfer from yoga to cycling: the fine art of relaxation. When you're cycling, your legs are the prime actors in the situation. But they're not the only thing working, not by a longshot. Your hips and glutes (butt muscles) add power to each pedal stroke, and your core—the complex web of muscle, bone and tendon made up of your hips, your pelvis, your lower spine, your lower abdominal muscles, and

your lower back muscles—stabilizes your hips and facilitates a smooth and balanced application of energy as you ride. Your middle abdomen, middle back, and upper back keep you upright and centered, and your arms, of course, help you hold on to the handlebars so you can both balance your body and steer the bike.

There's a lot going on. All those muscles are engaged while you ride, so technically speaking they're not fully relaxed, as in when you're lounging on the couch or sleeping—but at the same time, none of those muscles need to be unnecessarily tense. This is especially true for the muscles not directly involved in propelling the bike forward, like your shoulders, neck, and—this may sound funny—the muscles of your forehead and face. I'll come back to that in a second, but for the moment simply wrap your mind around the idea that while you ride, you should focus on keeping your entire body relaxed.

The Essential Alignments

One of the first postures you learn in a yoga class is the Mountain pose, or *Tadasana* in Sanskrit. It's the basic standing posture and forms the foundation of almost everything you do in beginning and intermediate yoga. *Tadasana* teaches you the following alignment principles you hear over and over in every style of yoga:

*Important Note: alignment in yoga is all about **relationship** as opposed to **position**. It's common and necessary for teachers to use language shortcuts, i.e. "your foot is out of line," or "straighten your knee." When they say these things, what they're really reminding you to do is remember the concept behind the essential alignments.*

- 1) Lengthen your spine. You do this by engaging the muscles of your lower abdomen, trunk, and side body. The key idea is to work to create distance between the tops of your hips and your lower ribs.
- 2) Imagine your head floating freely at the top of your spine, directly above your sacrum, in the center of your pelvis.
- 3) Relax your shoulders. Always maintain distance and ease between your ears and your trapezius muscles (the muscles connecting your shoulder to your neck).
- 4) Imagine a straight, connected, and smooth line of alignment running down from your shoulders, through your hips, knees, ankles, and out through the second toe of each foot. This rule gets thrown out the window when you start doing twists, but we're not worrying about twists right now.

How To Use the Essential Alignments on the Bike

I'm going to circle back to the concept of on-bike relaxation and the idea you need to actively relax all muscles that aren't directly involved in propelling your bike forward. To illustrate the importance of this, I'll tell you a little anecdote from my early yoga days. In class one evening, we were working on handstands up against the wall. I got myself up and thought I was doing pretty well. I lengthened my spine, I aligned my shoulders, hips, knees, heels, and toes; I kept my head in line with my spine, centered directly under my pelvis. I tried to keep everything relaxed. Because, after all, what is a handstand but an upside down *Tadasana* with your hands up above your head? I didn't realize it, but I'd also done a host of other things: my jaw was clenched, my teeth were bared, my lips curled into a snarl, my nostrils were flared, and my forehead was lined with tension.

My teacher, a petite, fifty-something blonde woman named Jennifer—who happens to be one of the strongest people I've ever met—strolled over to check on me and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" I asked. "I'm literally like dying here. Help!"

"You're doing great, sweetie. I have one question for you, though."

"Yeah?"

"Do you really think using all the muscles of your face is going help you hold your handstand?"

She reached out and touched my forehead, jaw, and neck, then said gently, "Relax all this."

It was like Obi-wan Kenobi had played a Jedi mind-trick on me. As I relaxed "all this," the clutter cleared from my mind. She was right; I was wasting a ton of energy using muscles that had absolutely nothing to do with a handstand. In an instant I was able to concentrate on the things that mattered—my arms, my spine, my hips, and my legs. The same rule applies when you're riding your bike. You absolutely do not need the muscles of your neck, face, jaw, forehead and shoulders to keep the bike moving forward, nor do you need them to keep apply the essential alignments while riding. All the action is in your legs, your hips, and spine. That's where you need to use your energy and that's where you should focus your mind.

Here's what you need to apply yoga while riding—think of this as your on-bike yoga checklist:

- 1) Lengthen your spine. Use the muscles of your lower abdomen, trunk, and side body to increase the distance between the top of your hips and your lower ribs. You can do this if you're in an upright position on a mountain bike or beach cruiser, and you can do this if you're in an aggressive, forward leaning positing on a road or time trial bike. Imagine your spine growing up and out of your hips like a tree trunk reaching from its roots up the sun and sky.
- 2) Relax your shoulders, neck, jaw, face, and forehead. Increase the distance between your neck and your ears while you soften your trapezius muscles.
- 3) Keep your shoulders in line with your hips, knees, heels, and toes. Don't let your knees go in or out, and don't let your feet toe in or toe-out. You can maintain these lines of alignment even though your legs are moving steadily.
- 4) Think of your hips as a hinge. This is true particularly if you're on a road bike (think skinny-tire Tour de France style) and you need to lean forward. As you reach your spine up and out of your hips as in (1) above, think of your torso laying down nice and long over the top tube of your bike. If you're an upright cruiser, simply sit up and keep that spine nice and long.
- 5) Grip the bars like firmly but without unnecessary tension. You need to keep a good grip on your handlebars for safety's sake, but you don't need to use any extra energy. The muscles of your arms should be consciously relaxed, and—in the words of Eddy Merckx—the greatest cyclist in history, you should hold the handlebars "like your carrying a dozen eggs."

Go through this check-list throughout your ride—about every five minutes is perfect. If you find yourself tensing up, don't worry. I'm on my bike at least 10 hours a week, and regularly go on rides over two hours in duration. Which means I go through this list well over twenty times per ride.

Guess how many times I have to remind myself to lengthen my spine, relax my shoulders, smooth the lines of my jaw and face, use my hips as hinges, and loosen up my grip on the bars?

Every. Single. Time.

And every time, I'm grateful. The on-bike yoga check-list helps me pedal efficiently, conserve energy, and reminds me to relax what needs to stay relaxed and work what needs to work. The essential

alignments of yoga, applied in this context with this simple five-point check-list, also function to prevent injury: when you use your hips as a hinge and engage your abdomen, trunk, and side body to lengthen your spine, you both free your thigh bones to move freely in your hip sockets and take the pressure off of your lower back, which tends to compress when you're on the bike for any length of time. And there's one more added bonus: during the time it takes to run through the list, your mind is distracted from the sensation all cyclists dread—those burning thighs.