

Putting the “self” into self MLD

Yoga basics enhance Manual Lymphatic Drainage self management time

By Lisa McKhann



While this article refers to doing MLD by hand, it applies equally well to those who use a pneumatic pump.

Those of us with lymphedema know that doing daily self “Manual Lymph Drainage” (MLD) can be just as tedious, mechanical and bothersome as it sounds. We’re taught to perform 5–8 oval-shaped rotations per spot, not too hard, and slowly. (“Sun-rise... sun-set...,” my physiotherapist droned, when teaching me how to care for my leg). We start with some deep abdominal breathing before launching into our custom sequence of hand placements and magic circles to move lymph from wherever it’s bogged down.

Through recent yoga teacher training, I found a new way to practice my morning self MLD that transforms it from an I-have-to chore into an I-get-to treat. It doesn’t take any longer or require any gear. You don’t have to know a thing about yoga to borrow these simple tools. In fact, you already know the basics through MLD—deep breathing, rhythmic counting and gentleness.

I invite you to try any of these practices for a few days or a week. Sense and feel what it’s like to center self MLD within a more focused yet relaxed mind, body, and spirit.

A little privacy please: do not disturb

Granted, sometimes we just have to get on with self MLD amid life’s commotion. Sometimes, though, there’s time and space available for privacy, if only we claim it. Close the door. Hang or communicate the ‘do not disturb’ sign. Turn off your phone. I like to pull down the window shades. A private space, free from interruption, is a beautiful start to tuning in through mindfulness to your self MLD, and through self MLD to your mind.³

Beyond privacy, ask yourself what little thing might help you feel more comfortable or at ease? For instance, I like warmth during self MLD, so in winter I pre-warm my bed with a heated mattress pad. Tend to yourself. Be

kind. Do you like an eye shade or the smell of incense, maybe some ambient music or nature sounds? Any of these might help you come into the present moment, but none are necessary.

Soft face and eyes

Once situated for a self MLD session, we all usually attend first to the terminus, near our collarbones. Wherever you start, begin by noticing your breathing and relaxing your face. Feel your brow smooth, your cheeks droop, your jaw slacken, and your tongue grow heavy. Let your lips lightly close, your eyelids lower, and your gaze soften. Already, in softening the muscles of your face, you are inviting quiet to your mind.

Yoga teaches the use of a soft gaze or closed eyes—which ever feels most comfortable to you—as a basic technique. Without external objects to see, we ease ourselves further inward. Your mind will still ricochet about, plenty! Just notice the thoughts floating in like soap bubbles, and let them drift off or pop.

Gentle deep breath

Deep abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing is the natural breath of babies. This belly breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system, our mode of rest and digest. This is when we recover from stress and fully nourish ourselves. Unfortunately, shallow chest breathing—meant for fight, flight or freeze times—becomes habit for many, including me. We want a restful system for self MLD time—and for most times!³

By bringing sustained deep breathing throughout your self MLD session, you: activate the deep lymph channels of your core, calm



Seen here on a portage in the Quetico Provincial Park, Lisa loves to camp and is grateful that she can manage her lymphedema even in the wilderness.



Lisa McKhann was diagnosed with lymphedema in her leg eight years after surgeries for ovarian cancer. She is a certified Soma Yoga teacher (200 level) through Yoga North International Soma Yoga Institute and lives in Duluth, Minnesota.

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your nervous system, and provide your mind with a focus point. Deep breathing in yoga and lymphedema treatment doesn't mean huffing and puffing. In fact, it's usually almost silent.

Diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing:

To check your breathing, spread the fingers of one hand on your belly between your navel and your ribcage. Place the other hand on your chest. With abdominal breathing, your lower hand will rise and fall slightly with your belly, while the hand on your chest remains relatively still.

Simply breathe through your nose with your mouth gently closed. You may notice your breath at your nostrils—cool coming in, warmer going out—or in your belly, ribs, or elsewhere.

And, yes, sometimes noticing your breath makes it impossible to breathe naturally. Let it go for awhile.

Even breath: A simple and safe breath practice is to even the length of your inhale and your exhale. First, while counting your MLD rotations, observe your exhales and inhales. Then, see if you can nudge them into balance: a couple circles per inhalation, balanced by a couple circles per exhalation, or whatever your body says. Listen. Tune in.

Slower breath: After finding an easy, even breath, you can experiment with slowing it down a bit. Without holding, explore finding a slow, even flow in and a slow, even flow out. Each slower breath is deeper, fuller, more effective, yet effortless. Enjoy the calm and the nourishment you are giving yourself.

Mantra—say what?

Exploring words or sounds—mantras—may be over the top for you or the icing on the cake. Every spiritual path in the world uses repeated

sounds or words as prayer, chant or invocation. Mantra might elevate or deepen your time, your practice. It's another tool to still your restless mind, this time with waves of internal sound and contemplation.

Yoga has taught mantras for thousands of years, which come to us in Sanskrit. 'So ham' is a good mantra for beginners. It means 'I am'. This mantra is great for "getting grounded in self-love."¹ In yoga, a mantra is repeated silently to yourself. Explore a mantra over the weeks to see where it takes you.

Inhale: "Sooooooo"/Exhale "Haaaamm"
Inhale: "Freeeeeeee"/Exhale "Flowww"

At the end of your self MLD session, pause. Be. Relax there for one minute. Let your eyes slowly take in the room. Wiggle or stretch. Kindly re-enter the day and place around you. Kindly carry the benefits of your practice with you. Be well. Namaste. **LP**

A full set of references can be found at www.lymphedemapathways.ca



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