

The Aerial Yoga Manual

Volume 1

A step-by-step guide for teachers and students of
any aerial yoga or fitness program

~PREVIEW~

Rebekah Leach

Photos by Matthew Leach

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First edition was published in 2009

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This book may be purchased with bulk discounts. Please send an e-mail to aerial.dancing@yahoo.com for more information or visit AerialDancing.com.

When practicing any aerial fitness program, always do so in the presence of a trained professional, with load-tested fabric hanging from load-tested rigging, which has been set-up and is inspected frequently by rigging professionals, along with crash pads underneath the fabric. It is recommended that you check with your doctor or healthcare provider before commencing any exercise especially a rigorous program that includes inversions such as aerial yoga.

Whilst every care has been taken in the preparation of this material, there is a real chance of injury in execution of the movements described in this book. The Publishers and all persons involved in the making of this manual will not accept responsibility for injury to any degree, including death, to any person as a result of participation in the activities described in this manual. Purchase or use of this document constitutes agreement to this effect. Furthermore, rigging of aerial equipment is not discussed in this manual. It is highly recommended that you consult a professional rigger when it comes to the use of any hanging equipment.

ISBN 978-0-557-28838-0

Third Edition

Published by Rebekah Leach

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Preface

For the past three years, I have been watching the worldwide birth, growth and sequential rapid spread of aerial yoga with fascination. My own aerial yoga story began in 2007. I had just moved to Ojai, CA, a hidden treasure of a town, where it's rare to find a resident who doesn't do yoga. At that point in time, I was intensely immersed in the aerial arts, with a large emphasis on fabric. For the purpose of introducing students to work in the air, I was working on aerial fabric with a low tied in it. Having a loop provided a way for students to work in tandem with the ground and fabric simultaneously, so that students could learn how an apparatus can take your weight, and then how this can be used for stretching, building strength, and ultimately for dance and other flow movement.

Putting these two factors together meant that I had an abnormal amount of students who practice yoga on a regular basis. Many people would make comments on the movements such as, "oh - this is just pigeon only upside-down" (in reference to a move that aerialists typically call gazelle). And other movements... So, in my surroundings, naturally I began thinking more and more about this concept of combining aerial with yoga.

Then a little light bulb went off in my head that said, *this seems like such a natural progression, I bet there are others out there undertaking the exact same thing.* Living on the edge of a national forest was not the best place for an internet connection, but one day I eagerly waited out the loading of the pages to see what would come up when I typed "aerial yoga" into Google. When compared to today, I am amazed to think back on that memory of only finding one article and one person and one picture. I figured that there were others out there, but they just hadn't made their way into cyberspace yet.

It remained a small, growing thought at the back of my mind, "what would it look like to combine aerial with yoga?" But it was still another year before I took action. Fast forward to the summer of 2008 - the Aerial Dance Festival held annually in Boulder, CO was offering an aerial yoga class! The apparatus of choice: trapeze. *This is going to be interesting,* I thought, *what can do you with yoga and a trapeze?* While my apparatus of choice remains to this day aerial fabric, the class gave me the spark I needed to start creating a curriculum and then, open up classes for aerial yoga.

There's a lot that happened in between then and now which is a story for another time. It suffices to say that I suddenly found myself with the freedom to spend time working on perfecting an aerial yoga curriculum while producing this manual and the videos that go with it. My curriculum has grown and evolved, and taken shape. I like it more and more all the time! I must confess, I have not always liked my work-in-progress curriculum but I knew I had to start somewhere especially because at the time, there was no one else to dialogue with, bounce ideas around, etc.

One might say that I created the moves in this book, but I would not agree. I feel that it was a job in translation. It was about taking a look at a yoga move and asking the question, “In what ways can the fabric support the body in that position?” The fabric mirrors many of the tools that have already been in place for yogis such as the use of a strap. The process felt very systematic. Once I created the categories that I describe in the introduction, moves just fell into place. Now, I will say I “discovered” these moves. This just means that no one taught them to me and I got the privilege of being an explorer, but I do not think that these moves are unique to my body. Granted, it may take a while before someone else comes to the same crazy moves, but in general, it does not at all surprise me when I see similar basic moves in an aerial yoga class that has no connection to me. “Bodies in motion will find similar movement” and this is a classic example of that quote in action.

Just as I wrote in my aerial fabric manual series, I believe it’s important to honor the pioneers of a new art form, but I hope that we can have a collaborative spirit in the growth of aerial yoga just as in any other movement form and not get caught up with a move “belonging” to someone. Choreography belongs to someone. Moves do not. Sometimes, it’s hard to tell the difference. Applying this here, pioneers are honored by you giving credit that you were inspired by them, you learned new things from them, and you can complete the circle by acknowledging their influence upon your own work. It remains that the movement itself does not belong to them. It belongs to the people.

Please don’t misunderstand what I am saying – all rules of copyright, etc. still apply! But, as I watched the growth of aerial yoga, I have witnessed an amazing thing – multiple people coming to the same conclusions at the same time. Each pioneer has led with their own style, created some left-field moves that are unique to them, made different choices about what to call aerial yoga, how to divide the line between aerial arts and aerial yoga, and are now making choices about how to lead the next generation. When you type “aerial yoga” into Google, you no longer have just one result* – you have a multitude and I’m glad that among that multitude, you and I have come together to move this movement forward.

Happy Flying,
Rebekah

**Granted, at the time of this writing, this aerial yoga manual series remains to be the first and only book written on aerial yoga. I mean multitude by way of everything surrounding aerial yoga. It wouldn’t surprise me if, in the coming decade, aerial yoga became as ubiquitous as yoga itself.*

Sitting on the loop

Prerequisite: none

ABOUT THIS MOVE

If you have ever swung on a swing, then there is not a lot of new information here. Although, you'd be surprised at how long some adults have gone without a swing at the park. It brings out the playfulness in us, and that is one of the best qualities of aerial yoga – it lightens the spirit which opens the door to resting well. While the initial concept is simple, there are some balancing exercises that are harder than they first appear.

There are two main ways to get into sitting on the loop. One is from the front, like getting on a swing at the park, and one is from the back, putting in one leg at a time. Since most people are familiar with a swing, they are tempted to treat the fabric just like a swing and then what happens is that they pull up and miss getting their buttocks over the loop. This happens because they misjudged the quality of the fabric. It is soft and light and can easily stick to your body. A swing at the park is heavy and when you lift up, it generally stays put. Not so with the looped fabric. Now, this does depend on how high the fabric is set. If the loop is low, then there is no problem, but if the loop is higher, you'd be surprised by the difficulty it poses to some people. In effort to bring aerial yoga to the people, I like to offer the following method as an alternative if the fabric is too high to comfortably get into like a swing. This also allows for a first lesson in hanging from the shoulders in neutral position.

1 Put one leg through the looped fabric. Bend the standing leg and begin taking weight in your hands. Keep your shoulders “seated” in your back. Do not let your shoulders come up as you take weight in your grip. It can be tempting to bend your arms, but see if you can keep them straight.

Note: this is our first opportunity to apply the lessons of neutrality talked about in the introduction. The shoulders are to be pulled into their neutral position in the back with the arms slightly forward.



2 Hold on with both hands to the fabric as you bring your other leg into the loop. Again, keep those shoulders in mind. You can imagine a large air bubble held between the base of the neck and the shoulders that you don't want to pop.



3 Come up to a seated position. If you can reach the floor with your toes, feel free to push off and give yourself a swing.



Exit Strategy

Hold on to both sides of the fabric. Lift your weight so that you can step forward onto the ground, just as you would exit a swing.

Progression

While sitting on the loop, carefully remove your hands from the fabric for a balance. To make the balance more challenging, close your eyes. To make it even more challenging, swing while doing this. To make it even *more* challenging, flip to the flying staff pose to read more about the process of straightening your legs in this position.

Cathy Gauch, of Aircat Aerial Arts discovered the challenges of balancing with your eyes closed while recovering from a brain injury that she received from a car crash in 2009. As a teacher of aerial yoga, she has much insight into the way the brain interacts with airborne movement as she went through the recovering process. She never gave up at coming back to her love of the aerial arts; she has simply found new ways to challenge herself.



Reverse Straddle

Prerequisite: none

1 Put your arms through the fabric as if you were getting on a swing, but only put your arms through. Situate yourself so that the fabric is at your back, supporting your ribs with the looped fabric. Extend your legs in front of you so that you are now leaning your weight into the loop. Hold the fabric with bent arms, elbows at your sides.



2 Think of pulling up and at the same time pushing your hands toward your toes as you engage your abdominal muscles to pull the legs up. It helps to bend your knees when you first start. As you raise your legs, keep them open, making sure that they pass on the outside of the fabric as you rotate back.



3 Once you have the fabric comfortably positioned on the pelvic bone, open your legs outward. **Warning: DO NOT PUT YOUR LEGS THROUGH THE LOOP!** Use your lower abdominal muscles to help rotate the pelvic girdle so that the knees stay facing the ground.



4 (*Optional Step*) This step is applicable if the loop is still around your stomach rather than your hips. The reverse straddle will not be comfortable until you find just the right position of the fabric around your hips.

A) Place your legs against the outside of the fabric while sickling your feet so that your toes pull in to meet each other.



Relaxation Pose

Prerequisite: none

This move is likened to the corpse pose lying on the floor from traditional yoga, but don't let that trick you into thinking that they are the same pose. The hammock does not give support to your bones in the same way that the floor does. So do not think of this pose as a "replacement" for the traditional corpse pose. Rather, enjoy each in its own way.

- 1** Spread out the loop into a hammock and sit on about half of the material. Open the fabric with your arms and make sure that the fabric covers your shoulders with enough extra for your head.



- 2** Holding your excess fabric above your head, lay back into your hammock. Use your feet to open up the rest of the fabric so that your entire body is lying inside. Adjust so that you are comfortable.



- 3** Stretch your legs by bringing one leg at a time toward your nose. Hold on to your leg as you straighten it and then release it. Continue to press with the opposite leg into the fabric.



