

yoga
JOURNAL
SPECIAL ISSUE

YOGA TODAY

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO DAILY PRACTICE

22 Home Practice FUNDAMENTALS

BEST
POSES
FOR
**CORE
STRENGTH**

13 POSES FOR
CALM,
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& FOCUS

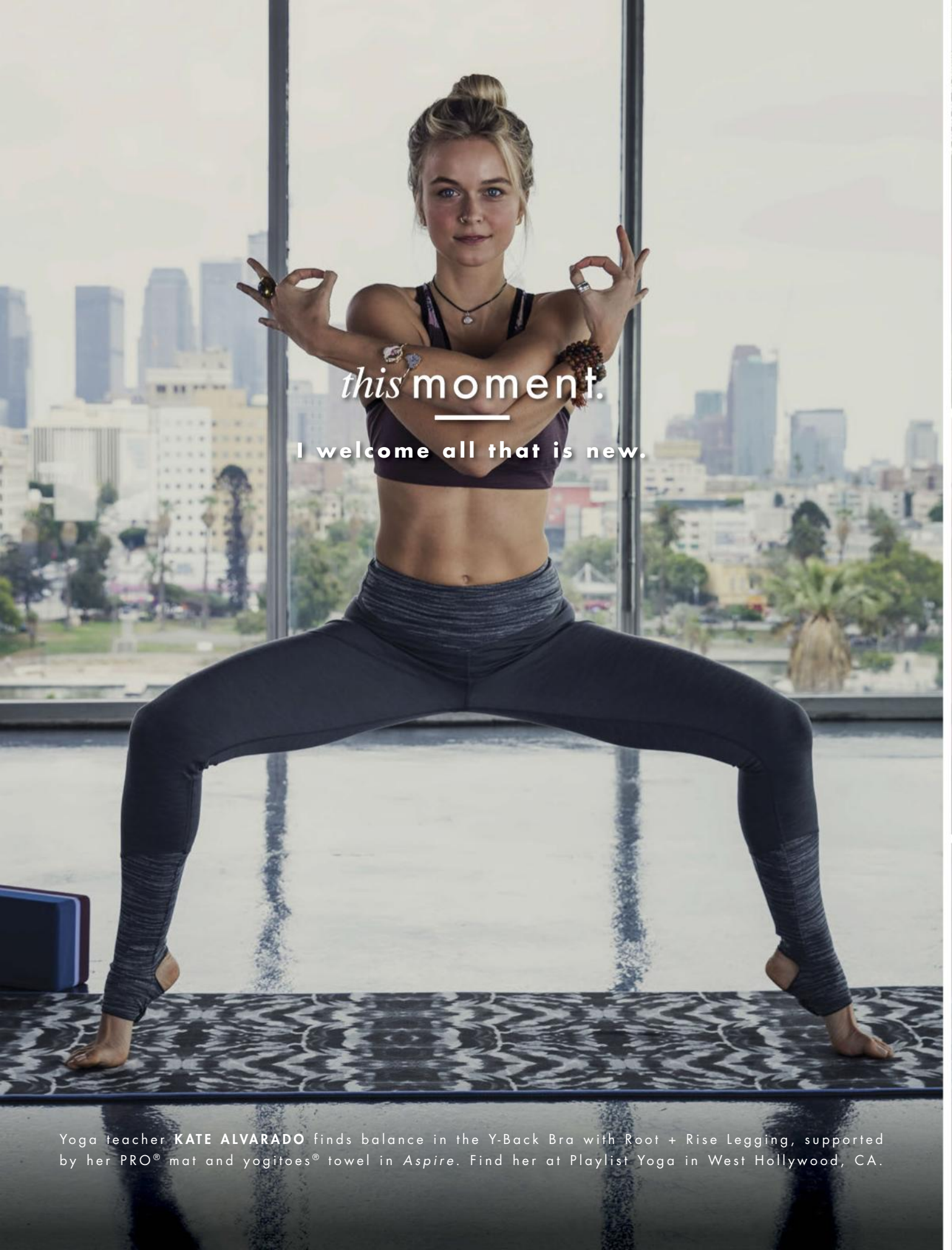
» **SPECIAL
SELF-CARE SECTION**

GET STRONG

24 NEED-TO-KNOW POSES

Tailor your
routine to your
unique needs

+ THE KEY TO PRACTICING AT HOME

A woman with blonde hair in a bun is performing a wide-legged yoga pose (Virabhadrasana II) on a patterned mat. She is wearing a dark purple sports bra and grey leggings. Her arms are crossed in front of her chest with hands in the Anjali mudra. She is looking directly at the camera. The background is a large window overlooking a city skyline with various skyscrapers and buildings under a hazy sky. The floor is a dark, reflective surface.

this moment.

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Back to basics

IT'S FUNNY, THE NAME OF THIS ISSUE: YOGA TODAY. The practice of “yoga today” has both drastically changed since its inception some 5,000 years ago (imagine the founding yogis of Northern India experimenting with AcroYoga while wearing wildly patterned yoga tights) and remained fundamentally the same: a mix of physical and spiritual techniques designed to integrate mind, body, and spirit. That said, given the variety of styles and philosophies out there, it sure does help to have a handle on the basics—especially if you're new to yoga or practicing mostly on your own at home.



Over the past 41 years, *Yoga Journal* has had some of the most talented yoga teachers in the world provide instruction on yoga's essential asanas—standing postures, backbends, core strengtheners, twists, inversions, forward bends, and restorative poses. Their good, solid instruction is the kind that will serve you well throughout a lifetime of practicing yoga, no matter your preferred style or personal strengths and challenges. So we

gathered their wisdom for you in one handy reference manual. Keep it close, and you'll always have answers to the most common questions yogis encounter: How can I have better control over my backbends? (Kate Tremblay shares her insights on page 50.) What's the safest way to practice inversions? (Aadil Palkhivala offers guidance on page 64.) And how can I quiet my mind and successfully drop into Savasana? (Former fretter John Hanc shares his journey—and some expert instruction from Richard Rosen—on page 82.)

Trust this special edition of *Yoga Journal* to answer all of these questions and more, and to supply everything you need to get a thriving home practice off the ground. What's more, since yoga doesn't stop when you step off the mat, we've included a special lifestyle section, steeped in wisdom from yoga's sister science, Ayurveda. Here, you'll learn to eat and live in ways that not only support your asana practice but that also reflect your daily needs, especially those that support who you truly are. I hope the tools and sequences in this issue make your home practice even more fulfilling. ❖

Carin Gorrell
Editor in Chief

yoga JOURNAL

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HERE'S THE RESOURCE

GUIDE you've been asking for: a collection of some of *Yoga Journal's* most informative instructional stories—written by some of the best teachers around.

Most of the contents here were originally created for the benefit of beginning yoga students looking to build a good basic practice. Taken together, they form a *Yoga Journal* reference guide of sorts.

Beginners will find this material accessible and helpful, but intermediate and advanced practitioners can (and should) use it to revisit the fundamentals. Plus, you just may find some surprising and inspiring insights hidden in these stories—just as we do.

THE EDITORS

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warming

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Amy Ippoliti in Revolved Crescent Lunge; photographed by Jeff Nelson. Stylist: Jessica Jeanne Eaton; hair/makeup: Beth Walker; top and bottoms: Prana.

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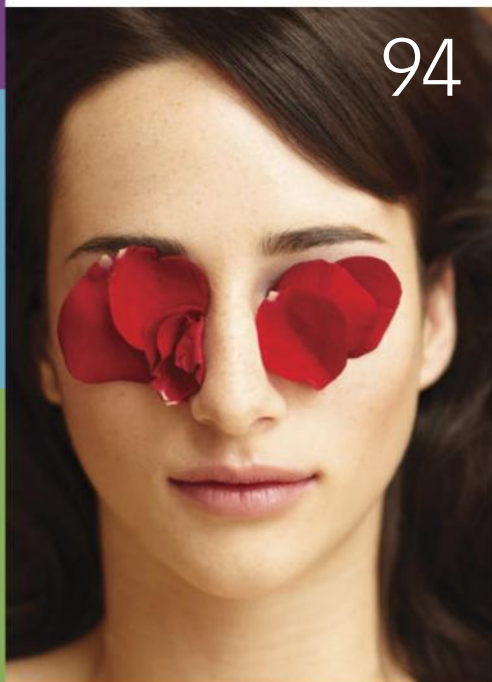
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108 Altogether Now Here's how to turn all the poses in this issue into a well-rounded home practice.

BY HILLARI DOWDLE



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A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress, is sitting in a lotus position on a grassy cliff. She is facing right, with her hands pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) near her chest. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong golden glow and lens flare effects. The background shows a body of water and distant land under a hazy sky.

Start your day with reverence for the sun,

S H I N E ON ME

and harness its life-giving energy with Surya Namaskar.

BY KELLY McGONIGAL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MARTINEZ

Each Sunday morning, Christopher Key Chapple opens his 8:30 yoga class with eight rounds of Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation). Students at the Hill Street Center in Santa Monica, California, reach toward the sky and then fold to the ground as if in prostration to the sun, expressing the same reverence for life-giving solar energy as did the ancient yogis.

Repeating the sequence in each of the four cardinal directions, the students perform a silent yet powerful ritual of gratitude. Chapple, a professor of Indic and comparative theology at Loyola Marymount University, says the sequence not only wakes up the body but also “calls us to stretch our minds and spirits to the corners of the universe, allowing us to feel the vast expanse of the cosmos within the movement of our bodies.”

To Chapple, Surya Namaskar is nothing less than the embodiment of the Gayatri mantra, a sacred prayer to the sun. “As we sweep our arms up and bow forward, we honor the earth, the heavens, and all of life in between,” he says. “As we lower our bodies, we connect with the earth. As we rise up from the earth, we stretch through the atmosphere once more, reaching for the sky. As we bring our hands together in Namaste, we gather the space of the heavens back into our heart and breath, acknowledging that our body forms the center point between heaven and earth.”



L I G H T
U P YOUR LIFE



TADASANA (Mountain Pose)

Start by establishing equal weight on both feet and a tall, bright posture through the spine and crown of the head. Bring your palms together in front of the heart center. Pause and imagine a sun at your heart, shining brighter with each inhalation. Sense gratitude for the life-giving energy of the sun, for the *prana* (life force) that flows through you and all other beings.

URDHVA HASTASANA (Upward Salute)

Inhale, turn your palms out, and sweep your arms up and overhead. The spine can take a gentle backbend, lifting the heart and expanding the chest. Let this movement be a gesture of opening to life. Gaze up, keeping the forehead relaxed and the face soft.

UTTANASANA (Standing Forward Bend)

Exhale and fold forward at the hips. Let the descent be an offering of gratitude. Keep the spine straight as long as you can, then let it softly round into a full forward bend. You can bend your knees to ease strain on your back or hips. At the end of the exhalation, draw your chin in and gaze at your legs.

ARDHA UTTANASANA (Half Standing Forward Bend)

Inhale and lift your chin, your chest, and your gaze. Stay rooted through strong legs, reaching down through your heels. Press your hands into your shins to help lift your heart and straighten your spine. Savor this smaller movement, letting your breath fill you up.

While it's not always taught with such lofty intentions, the Sun Salutation is nonetheless deeply potent wherever and whenever it is practiced. "It revitalizes every aspect of your being, from physical to spiritual," says Shiva Rea, creator of Prana Flow Yoga and founder of the Global Mala Project.

Rea prefers the Sanskrit name for the sequence, arguing that the translation to the English "Sun Salutation" doesn't capture the intention and experience of the word *namaskar*. "*Namaskar* means 'to bow,' to recognize with your whole being," she explains. "The meaning is inherent in the movement. Eventually, you are going to have an ecstatic experience of the life force entering your body."

Surya Namaskar also embodies the spirit of yoga in the West: It is intensely physical but can be infused with devotion. And like so much about yoga today, it reflects both ancient ideas and modern innovation. Understanding its history and meaning will allow you to bring the healing energy of the sun and a connection to the Divine into your own practice.

Sun kissed The original Surya Namaskar wasn't a sequence of postures, but rather a sequence of sacred words. The Vedic tradition, which predates classical yoga by several thousands of years, honored the sun as a symbol of the Divine. According to Ganesh Mohan, a Vedic and yoga scholar and teacher in Chennai,

As a moving meditation, Surya Namaskar develops focus and peace of mind. Let your breath guide each movement, and extend the movement over the entire length of each inhalation or exhalation. Your gaze should follow the direction of movement, linking your mental energy with your physical action. In the spirit of the Sun Salutation, bring to mind and heart a sense of gratitude for life, and let the movement remind you of your connection to something bigger.



CHATURANGA DANDASANA (Four-Limbed Staff Pose)

Exhale and step or jump back to Plank Pose. On the same exhalation, shift your weight slightly forward, bend at the elbows, and lower your body halfway to the ground until your upper arms are parallel to the floor and close to your side ribs. Be careful not to sink your hips or collapse your core. Let this action be an offering of the heart, a surrendering of the ego, a full-body prostration to the earth. To modify, lower your knees or whole body to the ground.

URDHVA MUKHA SVANASANA (Upward-Facing Dog Pose) or BHUJANGASANA (Cobra Pose)

Inhale and press back through your toes to come to the tops of your feet. Simultaneously, press down through your hands and draw your shoulders back to broaden your chest, letting the inhalation expand your heart. Activate your feet and legs to float your knee-caps, thighs, and hips. Lift your gaze past the tip of your nose. For a modification, practice Bhujangasana, keeping your elbows bent and your legs and pelvis rooted to the earth.

India, Vedic mantras to honor the sun were traditionally chanted at sunrise. The full practice includes 132 passages, which the practitioner performs in full prostration, lying in the direction of the sun in an expression of devotion.

However, the origins of Surya Namaskar in modern hatha yoga are more mysterious. “There is no reference to asanas as ‘Sun Salutation’ in traditional yoga texts,” Mohan says.

So where did this popular sequence come from? The oldest-known yoga text to describe the Sun Salutation sequence, the *Yoga Makaranda*, was written in 1934 by T. Krishnamacharya, who is considered by many to be the father of modern hatha yoga. It is unclear whether Krishnamacharya learned the sequence from other sources, or whether he invented it. In *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, yoga scholar N. E. Sjoman identifies an earlier text called the *Vyayama Dipika* (or “Light on Exercise”) that illustrates athletic exercises for Indian wrestlers, including some that are strikingly similar to Krishnamacharya’s version of Surya Namaskar.

So, it appears that Krishnamacharya was influenced by both athletics and spiritual practice, and it was the emphasis he placed

on the breath and on devotion that set his teaching of yoga asana apart from a purely athletic endeavor. According to Mohan, co-author (with his father, A. G. Mohan) of the 2010 book *Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings*, it was the attitude with which one practiced Surya Namaskar that Krishnamacharya cared about. Whether he was teaching the Vedic mantras or the sequence of postures, the intention he conveyed to his students was the same. “One is offering salutation to the Divine, represented by the sun, as a source of light removing the darkness of a clouded mind and as a source of vitality removing the diseases of the body,” says Mohan.

Krishnamacharya taught the sequence to his students, including K. Pattabhi Jois (founder of the Ashtanga Yoga system), B. K. S. Iyengar (founder of the Iyengar Yoga system), and Indra Devi (recognized as the first Western woman to teach yoga around the world). These students went on to become internationally prominent teachers and to inspire much of the practice in the West. As a result, Sun Salutations became an integral part of our modern practice.



ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

Exhale, tuck your toes under, and use the strength of your belly to pull your hips up and back. Establish a straight line from your wrists through your shoulders, spine, and hips. If this is difficult, you can bend your knees, take your feet wider apart, or lift your heels away from the ground. Relax the back of your neck. Stay for 5 breaths, feeling the flow of breath and holding the pose with strength but not strain. If you need to rest, drop to your knees and bow into Balasana (Child's Pose).

Rise up To enjoy the full experience of Surya Namaskar, Shiva Rea recommends four things. First, let the breath lead the movement. Each inhalation and exhalation should draw you into and through the next pose, and not be forced to fit a predetermined pace. "When you go into that state of following the breath, you are following the source," she says. "That is the heart of yoga."

Also, take the time to fully contemplate the meaning of Surya Namaskar and to sense your authentic gratitude to the sun. "Contemplating the vitality of the sun allows you to go to a deeper level of participation with the sequence," Rea says.

Rea also recommends adding mantra to the movements. "With mantra, you really start to feel the spiritual activation of Namaskar," she explains. You can use any sacred sound, including Om, on the exhalations, or open and close your practice with a recitation of the Gayatri mantra (*facing page*).

Finally, Rea suggests practicing outdoors, in the presence of the sun, at least occasionally: "It's really important to experience it with the rising sun, feeling the rays of the sun on your body."

FEET TO HANDS (Transition)

At the end of the fifth exhalation, jump or step your feet forward to your hands.

Greet the sun Although Sun Salutations can be practiced at any time of the day, the early-morning hours are considered especially auspicious. The hour just before sunrise is called *Brahma muburta* ("time of God"). "The mind is supposed to be most calm and clear at this time. Ayurveda recommends that one awake at this time every day," says Mohan.

For most of us, early morning is one time of the day we can be alone, without demands and distractions. Rising a bit early can allow you to experience inner stillness and offer your energy to a greater intention for your day. "An extra one to two hours of sleep cannot equal the energy of the sunrise," Rea says. "Celebrating being alive is the essence of a spiritual experience."

If getting up to practice yoga before sunrise seems intimidating or impossible, you can capture the feeling of Surya Namaskar by doing a simple morning ritual whenever you wake up. Bring the attitude of the Sun Salutation to your heart and mind, face the direction of the rising sun, and offer a formal bow of gratitude. "Even in long winters, you can face the sun," says Rea. "Visualize that you have the sun inside your heart. Part of Surya Namaskar is really being able to see the sun inside yourself." ❖

Kelly McGonigal, PhD, is the author of Yoga for Pain Relief and teaches yoga and psychology at Stanford University. Visit her at kellymcgonigal.com.



ARDHA UTTANASANA (Half Standing Forward Bend)

Inhale and lift your chin, chest, and gaze, straightening the spine.



UTTANASANA (Standing Forward Bend)

Exhale and fold forward completely, softening the back.



URDHVA HASTASANA (Upward Salute)

Inhale, rise fully and radiantly with a straight spine, and look up.



TADASANA (Mountain Pose)

Exhale and return to Mountain Pose. Pause and feel the heart-opening effects of this sequence.

SACRED

S U N

Inspire your practice with the Gayatri mantra, a prayer to the divine light.

*Om bhur bhuvah svah
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.*

The eternal, earth, air, heaven
That glory, that resplendence of the sun
May we contemplate the brilliance of that light
May the sun inspire our minds.

Translation by Douglas Brooks

The Gayatri mantra first appeared in the Rig Veda, an early Vedic text written between 1800 and 1500 BCE. It is mentioned in the Upanishads as an important ritual, and in the Bhagavad Gita as the poem of the Divine. According to Douglas Brooks, PhD, a professor of religion at the University of Rochester and a teacher in the Rajanaka yoga tradition, the Gayatri is the most sacred phrase uttered in the Vedas. "It doesn't get more ancient, more sacred, than this. It's an ecstatic poetic moment," he says.

The mantra is a hymn to Savitur, the sun god. According to Brooks, the sun in the mantra represents both the physical sun and the Divine in all things. "The Vedic mind doesn't separate the physical presence of the sun from its spiritual or symbolic meaning," he says.

Chanting the mantra serves three purposes, Brooks explains. The first is to give back to the sun. "My teacher used to say the sun gives but never receives," Brooks says. "The mantra is a gift back to the sun, an offering of gratitude to refuel the sun's gracious

offering." The second purpose is to seek wisdom and enlightenment. The mantra is a request to the sun: May we meditate upon your form and be illumined by who you are? (Consider that the sun offers its gift of illumination and energy to *all* beings, without judgment and without attachment to the outcome of the gift.)

Finally, the mantra is an expression of gratitude, to both the life-giving sun and the Divine.

Brooks encourages taking a heart-centered approach to the mantra. "The sensibility it evokes is more important than the literal meaning. It's an offering, a way to open to grace, to inspire oneself to connect to the ancient vision of India," he says. "Its effect is to inspire modern yogis to participate in the most ancient aspiration of illumination that connects modern yoga to the Vedic tradition."

Teacher's Pet

ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) was the first asana I fell in love with. It remains my desert-island pose because it offers many benefits. When you're tired, staying in this pose for a spell will restore your energy. It can also help strengthen and shape your legs, ease shoulder stiffness, and slow your heartbeat. I find it the perfect microcosm of yoga practice: It requires both strength and flexibility; it teaches you to appreciate alignment and thus prepares you for doing inversions, backbends, and forward bends; and it offers philosophical lessons, such as the cultivation of stability and spaciousness, that will carry over into the rest of your life.

TRAINING GROUND

Most of us come to the yoga mat with a predisposition toward either bendiness or stiffness. Whichever end of the spectrum you swing toward, you can begin to balance your body by practicing Down Dog. If you're stiff, the pose will feel challenging because of tightness in the shoulders and hamstrings. If you're flexible, you're likely to collapse

Master this fundamental pose to feel all that yoga has to offer.



STRAIGHTEN
THE ELBOWS

PRESS HANDS TO MAT

YOGA TODAY



LIFT THE SITTING BONES

PRESS
QUADRICEPS
TOWARD
HAMSTRINGS

REACH
THROUGH
YOUR HEELS

DON'T overarch your lower back.

DO align your ears with
your upper arms.

warming



pose benefits

Opens and strengthens
the shoulders and upper body

Stretches the hamstrings
and calves

Tones the legs

contraindications

High or low blood pressure

Acid reflux

Hiatal hernia

History of stroke

Serious shoulder injury

in your lower back and shoulders. Unfortunately, bendy types might not feel the effects of the collapse until years later, when they begin to sustain injuries in their lumbar disks or rotator cuff muscles. But whether you are stiff or bendy, a wonderful modification that I call Puppy Dog can teach you the actions and alignment that allow you to experience a Down Dog that feels spacious and open but is also stable and strong.

PUPPY DOG

To begin, stand facing a wall. Place both of your hands on the wall at about the height of your frontal hipbones. Your hands should be shoulder-distance apart, with the creases of your wrists forming a horizontal line and your index fingers pointing straight up. Keeping this alignment in your hands, step back so that your arms and torso are parallel to the floor, feet are hip-distance apart and parallel, and hips are stacked over your feet.

Firmly connect to the wall with the whole of each hand and use the energy from this contact to help you elongate your spine as you press your hips away from the wall (*figure 1*). Creating this length is one of the central goals in Down Dog, but tightness in the shoulders can

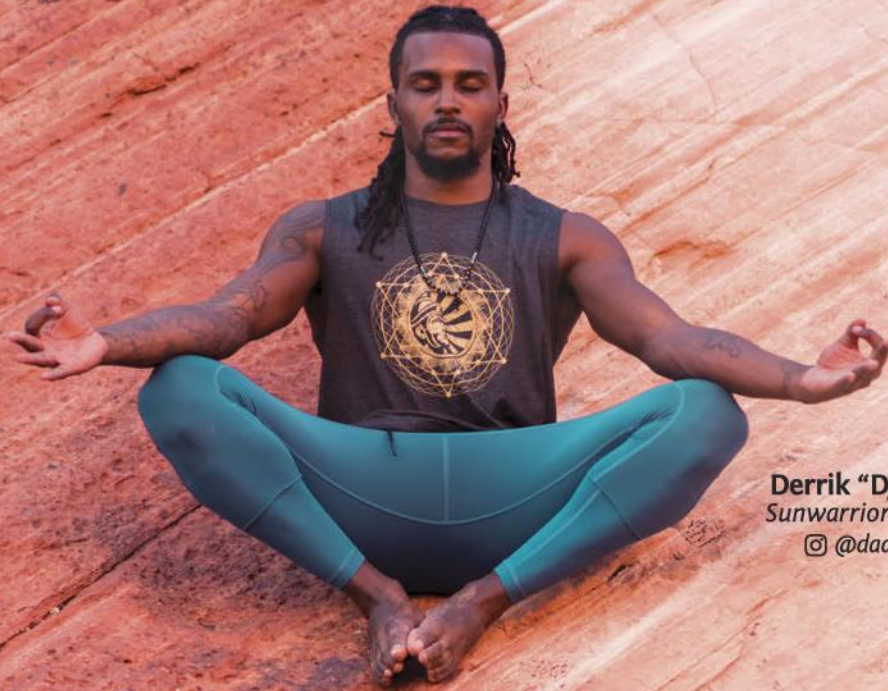


interfere with your ability to find this extension. Because the hands and arms in Puppy Dog are not bearing weight (as they are in Down Dog), the effect of tight shoulders is mitigated, allowing you to extend out of your shoulders and move most of your weight back into your legs.

As you breathe here and continue to lengthen your spine, notice if you've created congestion around your neck, which can happen if you're narrowing across your upper back or sinking your front ribs toward the floor. Pay attention

to the position of your head in relation to your upper arms: If you are more flexible, you will have a tendency to sink through the armpits, poke the front ribs toward the floor, and overarch the spine. But remember that, over time, this can injure the shoulders and lower back.

If your ears are lower than your upper arms, lift your head slightly, soften your front ribs, and rotate your shoulders away from your ears as you firm your triceps (outer arms). This external rotation should help bring your ears back in line



Derrik "DJ" Townsel
Sunwarrior Ambassador
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with your biceps. As you align your shoulders, you are establishing the quality of *sthira* (strength or steadiness). You can then use this *sthira* to create *sukha* (ease or spaciousness). A posture needs both attributes to have integrity and balance. Maintaining these stabilizing actions, press your hips away from the wall to create length through your spine, and then spread your shoulder blades away from your spine to create breadth across your upper back. Emphasize the spaciousness in your torso by engaging your quadriceps and pressing the tops of your thighs back, creating even more space in your lower back and waist area.

BLOCK PARTY

To set up for the next variation, place a pair of blocks flat and lengthwise toward the front of your mat, and arrange them so that they are shoulder-distance apart and parallel. Come to all fours, with your hands on the blocks and your hips stacked above your knees. Adjust the blocks so that your hands are an inch or so in front of your shoulders, with the fleshy part of your palms just over the closest edge for traction (as opposed to having your hands on the center of the blocks). This is the most stable position for your hands and is a way to make sure that the creases of your wrists form a straight line rather than tilting in diagonally—a common misalignment that hampers shoulder opening. Once you've organized your hands, set your feet hip-distance apart, lift your hips, and straighten your legs (*figure 2, page 16*).

Remember the actions and alignment from Puppy Dog. Extend your front and back body equally and emphasize the external rotation in the shoulders so that you don't collapse your armpits or create tension in your upper back. With your hands elevated on the blocks, you will be able to extend out of your shoulders more actively, transferring some of the weight of the pose from your arms to your legs. As you do this, engage your quadriceps and press them back, reaching your heels toward the floor. In *Light on Yoga*, B. K. S. Iyengar writes that Adho Mukha Svana-sana promotes shapely legs, but that will

different dogs

In the Yoga Sutra, the sage Patanjali writes, "*Sthira sukham asanam*," or, "The posture should be steady and easy." Our asanas should be equally alert and relaxed. Downward-Facing Dog Pose balances opposites and can be practiced in myriad ways. Various yoga traditions approach the posture differently. Here's a look at a few different Dogs.

ANUSARA This approach emphasizes the connection between the physical practice and the spiritual heart. Specific instructions often focus on lifting the undersides of the arms to allow a deeper connection of the shoulder blades with the back of the heart, then softening the heart and extending energy back out through the entire body.

ASHTANGA This tradition uses a short stance and spends five breaths in the pose, which makes sense for the heat-building flow that is central to this method. The gazing point is the navel. Students engage the *bandhas* and "jump" or "float" from Downward-Facing Dog to Dandasana (Staff Pose) in the Ashtanga primary series.

BIKRAM The 26-pose Bikram sequence does not include Downward-Facing Dog.

IYENGAR Down Dog is considered a neutralizing pose that is held for a long period of time (up to five minutes or more!) to establish alignment principles, generate heat, and build strength. This pose is a great preparation for the inversions that are a big part of this tradition.

KUNDALINI In certain Kundalini sequence sets, or *kriyas*, the pose is practiced, but it is called Tri-angle Pose. (On the other hand, the pose you might know as Tri-konasana is not practiced in the Kundalini tradition.)

happen only if the legs become an integral part of the posture. If your hamstrings are tight, straightening your legs will be challenging, but notice how the blocks help you to move in this direction. If your lower back rounds, bend your knees a little bit. As you energize your legs, imagine someone standing behind you with their hands at the tops of your thighs and pulling back so that your pelvis is drawn farther from your waist.

FULL DOG

To come into the classical pose, begin in Balasana (Child's Pose), with your arms extended in front of you. Have your hands shoulder-distance apart, with the creases of the wrists parallel to the front edge of the mat. You can turn your hands out slightly to help you extend out of your shoulders. As you press with your hands, try to lift your forearms away from the ground; this important intention will help stabilize your shoulders once you move into the full pose.

Next, incorporate the actions that you learned in the earlier variations. Externally rotate your shoulders; firm your outer upper-arm muscles in toward the bone. On an inhalation, draw yourself up onto your hands and knees, feet hip-distance apart. On an exhalation, press your hips back and up. Glance at your feet to make sure they are parallel; let your head hang, observing the relationship of your head to your upper arms.

Try to balance your effort so that all of your limbs can work together to obtain length along the spine. Just as you may find both alertness and relaxation in the alignment of this pose, so may you also bring the spirit of *sthira* and *sukha* to the rest of your life. Too often in our daily lives these two qualities exist in opposition. On the yoga mat, however, we can learn to inhabit them simultaneously. ❖

Natasha Rizopoulos lives and teaches yoga in Boston.



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EYES, FOREHEAD,
AND JAW ARE SOFT
AND RECEPTIVE

TOP OF THE CHEST
LIFTS AND EXPANDS

SHOULDERS ARE DIRECTLY
OVER THE WRISTS

SPINE IS ARCING EVENLY

LOWER BACK IS LONG

SACRUM LENGTHENS
TOWARD THE HEELS

LOWER BELLY LIFTS
GENTLY INTO THE BODY

WEIGHT IS DISPERSED
EVENLY BETWEEN FINGERS,
PALMS, AND WRISTS

Flow Motion

Chaturanga and Upward-Facing Dog are key parts of any vinyasa flow practice. Here's how to do these poses correctly.

IF YOU'VE EVER TAKEN a flow class, you've heard the teacher call out "Chaturanga, Upward-Facing Dog, Downward-Facing Dog"—over and over again. Known as a vinyasa, this sequence is often inserted between poses, making them the most repeated poses in a flow-based class. When done

correctly, they build suppleness, strength, and endurance. They also require the spine to extend, as you arch into Upward Dog, and then lengthen, as you move into Downward Dog—ultimately bringing it into a neutral position. These poses cleanse the palate of the body so it's ready for the next pose.

Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) and Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Dog) are demanding for any practitioner, and repeatedly slogging through them can feel like an uphill battle. Ever feel your neck tense and your shoulders hunch as you take a nose-dive into Chaturanga, ultimately collapsing into a heap on the floor? Or press into Upward Dog and feel a sudden twinge in your lower back, causing you to rush back to Down Dog to find some ease? Racing through these poses can lead to injury—typically in the shoulder joints and lower back. But you can avoid these common problems if you learn proper alignment and build strength to sustain it through the entire flow.

Learning these poses in detail can be challenging, particularly in a flow class where the rhythm often takes precedence over the subtle nuances of postures. So, as you watch fellow students move



DO keep the shoulders directly over the wrists.



DON'T hunch your shoulders or strain your neck to look up.

LEGS ROTATE IN AND STRONGLY EXTEND



TOPS OF THE FEET PRESS INTO THE FLOOR



Modified Chaturanga Dandasana



Full Chaturanga Dandasana

through Chaturanga and into Upward Dog, you might feel some pressure to *fake* the poses and keep up with the class, rather than stand out as the solitary neophyte. But I urge you to resist this temptation.

Instead, I beg you (as I do my own students) to learn them slowly and to modify them. Rather than fake their motions and bypass their difficult aspects, develop these postures with finesse and mindfulness. It's true that if you allow yourself to be new—and a little lost—rather than bluffing the motions, your learning curve will be steeper. But you'll build strength as you learn this modified version of Chaturanga and spend time hovering just above the floor, allowing your arms to quiver. And as you extend your stay in Upward Dog, you'll create the opening in your chest and upper back necessary to master more complex backbends. Give yourself time to pause, rewind, and replay the poses, and one day, without gritting your teeth or hold-

ing your breath, you too will lower with control into Chaturanga and float effortlessly into Upward Dog.

CHART YOUR CHATURANGA

Come onto all fours with your palms directly underneath your shoulders, and your knees several inches behind your hips. Rest your shins and the tops of your feet on your mat. Spread your fingers wide and press the base of each one into the floor in order to evenly distribute the weight of your upper body.

Next, bring your awareness to your belly and pelvis. Tuck your tailbone slightly and gently firm your lower belly (just below your navel). These two actions are vital in both Chaturanga and Upward Dog because they elongate and support your lower back.

Now, slide your shoulders away from your ears and squeeze the bottom tips of your shoulder blades together. Feel how this awakens your upper back as it broadens your chest. Gaze forward as you relax

your jaw, soften your brow, and smooth out the texture of your breath.

With your knees on the floor, move your chest forward and down as you slowly bend your elbows and squeeze your upper arms into the sides of your body. Moving your chest *forward*—as opposed to only down—will keep your elbows aligned over your wrists and maintain the supportive architecture of your shoulders and arms. As you descend, keep your hips in line with your shoulders and chest.

Continue to move your chest forward and down until your upper arms are parallel to the floor—but not any lower (your elbows should form about a 90-degree angle). Remain here for two full breaths, staying with the intensity of Chaturanga instead of rushing through it. Breathe evenly and soften your facial muscles while you navigate the difficulty of this moment. If it's too hard, back off and maintain your body's integrity rather than overworking the pose, which leads to collapse or strain. If you're unable to

keep your upper arms parallel to the floor, back out of the pose by lifting higher up instead of crashing to the floor.

After a couple of breaths in modified Chaturanga, lower all the way to the floor. Then press back into Balasana (Child's Pose) for a moment of rest.

ONWARD TO UPWARD DOG

When practicing backbends, it's not the depth of your backbend that matters; it's more important to distribute the curve evenly along the full length of the spine. This is difficult to do in Upward Dog because you're supporting the weight of your entire torso with your arms and legs. But don't be discouraged—even if it's not your deepest backbend, Upward Dog strengthens your shoulders, arms, and abdomen.

Before tackling Upward Dog, consider this anatomical information: Your pelvic bone is one of the heaviest bones in your body—and it's more or less your center of gravity. This means that without proper support, it tends to sink toward the floor. While it's common to work hard in your upper body in order to stay lifted, the key to supporting your weight in Upward Dog is to use your belly and legs to hold the pelvis stable. This makes the posture easier and more sustainable.

From Child's Pose, come back onto your hands and knees. Move through modified Chaturanga, hovering about two inches above the floor. Then transition into Upward Dog by straightening your arms and stacking your shoulders directly over your wrists. Your shoulders may end up in front of your wrists, which can lead to strain. So look down at your hands to gauge where your shoulders are and adjust accordingly by moving yourself forward or back.

Now that your arms and shoulders are properly aligned, you can focus on your legs. To counteract lower-back compression in Upward Dog, keep the sacrum broad and long. To keep it broad, rotate your legs internally by spinning the outsides of your thighs toward the floor and pressing the pinkie toes into the mat. To keep it long, draw your tailbone toward your heels—as you did in Chaturanga—



and draw your lower belly up into your body. After these refinements, straighten your legs vigorously, lifting your shins and knees off the floor. Don't squeeze your buttocks as you do this. It may be difficult to keep the buttocks soft and the legs firm, but it's worth making the effort to do so since squeezing the buttocks will jam the lower back.

At this point, the only things touching the floor are the tops of your feet and the palms of your hands. To complete Upward Dog, make a few last adjustments in your upper body: First, observe how your weight is distributed on your hands and wrists. Is it concentrated on your wrists? Localized on one side of your palm? Or is it dispersed evenly? Make subtle shifts in your hands and arms until the weight is evenly distributed and no part of your wrist is being stressed. (You can check this

by looking at your mat—if you see an even handprint, you know you've got it.)

Stay in the pose as you lift, broaden, and draw your chest forward. Lift your collarbones as if they were going to loop over the top of your shoulders, and slide your shoulder blades down your back. As you did in Chaturanga, draw the lower tips of your shoulder blades toward each other and firm them into the back of your chest. Bring your shoulders down and back and observe how this helps lift your chest. Lastly, with your head placed directly over your shoulders, lift your gaze forward and slightly up. Avoid dropping the back of your skull to your shoulders. Instead, maintain an easy, natural curvature of your neck.

After three to six breaths in Upward-Facing Dog, bring your knees to the floor and transition into Child's Pose.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Now that you've practiced Chaturanga and Upward-Facing Dog separately, you can link them together and incorporate your breath into a flowing sequence.

Begin on all fours with your wrists directly under your shoulders, and your knees about a foot behind your hips. Draw a full, smooth inhalation into your body. As you exhale, move into Chaturanga by bending your elbows and lowering your chest until your upper arms are parallel to the floor.

On the next inhalation, move into Upward Dog by straightening your elbows until your shoulders are directly over your wrists. Continue inhaling, filling your lungs to the brim, and lift the tops of your thighs and knees away from the floor. Exhale and shift back onto all fours, or—as you do in Sun Salutations—come into Downward-Facing Dog.

Practice these poses consistently, and they'll feel less clunky and more silken. When the postures start to feel natural and graceful, you can begin to lift and straighten your legs in Chaturanga. Most important, enjoy the feeling of flow in your body at every stage. ❀

Jason Crandell teaches yoga in San Francisco and is a contributing editor to Yoga Journal.

Seat of Power

This is no easy chair; Utkatasana demands full-body engagement.

SOME YOGA POSES may come to you quickly and easily, with little struggle in flexibility or strength. Other poses can feel nearly impossible, even after years of practice. Utkatasana (Chair Pose) falls into a category of its own: It looks deceptively easy and straightforward, yet when you try it, you'll find it demands a great deal of flexibility in the shoulders as well as stability in the core and strength in the legs.

That is the challenge of Chair Pose. Its simple form offers little promise of glory. For all the effort it requires, you won't end up with your leg wrapped behind your head or in some other fancy position. When I teach Chair, at first it produces more frowns and even moans than almost any other pose. Yet when I ask my students to persevere, they are always glad they did. It's hard while you're in it, but in the end this pose brings a satisfying sense of accomplishment. It teaches you the determination you need to meet a challenge and the perseverance to return to it repeatedly over time, despite its difficulty.

Chair Pose will strengthen your thighs, helping to stabilize your knees. Your ankles will become more limber and sturdy, and your arms and shoulders will gain power and flexibility. As you reach your arms up and stretch the muscles between your ribs, you'll increase your breathing capacity. The pose can also help improve your posture. All of the core muscles fire as you hold the pose, lifting your pelvis into a more upright alignment

feeling fierce?

Utkata means "powerful" or "fierce," and while this pose calls for fiery power in the body, it's best practiced with a cool mind. Notice if you crunch your brow or clench your jaw; if so, relax them. If your breathing starts to turn into panting, lengthen your exhalations. You'll feel cooler and more focused.

LIFT YOUR
CHEST

ENGAGE
YOUR CORE

.....
LENGTHEN
LOWER BACK

.....
KEEP WEIGHT
IN HEELS

warming

and working against the tendency to exaggerate the arch of the spine as you reach up and back with the arms. Whew! Sound like a lot? That's the point of Chair Pose: You learn to handle many actions all at the same time for what feels like way too long.

It's helpful to practice Chair in two parts. First, practice the pose with the lower half of your body. Before adding the arms, work on bending your knees toward a right angle while shifting your weight back into your heels. Then, stand tall in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) and work on extending your straight arms up and overhead without letting your rib cage jut forward or your back overarch. Finally, you can bring all the elements together into a cohesive and powerful whole. Unite the work of the legs and arms by bringing your awareness to your torso as you lift your core muscles and lengthen your spine.

If you commit to a steady practice, you will gain stamina in this pose after a few months. When you take a break from your practice, it might feel as if all of your progress is gone once you return to the mat. If this is your situation—if your muscles are burning in Chair and it's a sweaty struggle of will—don't be discouraged. The pose is teaching you its most important lesson and a key concept in yoga: Steady practice over time is better than occasional, intense spurts. It's worth maintaining a regular daily practice rather than feeling like you have to start all over again each time you do a pose. Consistency in yoga yields deep and lasting results. ❖

Annie Carpenter leads classes and trainings and mentors teachers at Exhale Center for Sacred Movement in Venice, California.

Power up your lower body

SET IT UP

- ❖ Stand with your back against a wall and your hands on your hips.
- ❖ Step your feet about 2 feet from the wall and bend your knees into a right angle, as though you were sitting in a chair.
- ❖ Adjust your feet so that your shins are perpendicular to them, with your knees stacked above your ankles.

REFINE As you exhale, press your heels strongly into the floor until you feel your calves and hamstrings engage. Maintain the strength in your legs and observe the back of your body making contact with the wall. The backs of your pelvis, your ribs, your shoulders, and your head will touch the wall, while the lower back and neck will tend to curve away from it.

If you feel your hips tipping forward away from the wall, exaggerating the curve in your lower back, use your hands to redirect the hip points into an upright alignment. Activate your lower belly to sustain this position. The action feels like drawing up a zipper from the pubic bone toward your navel. Use just the right amount of effort. Don't go so far as to

STEP 1

Work your legs in a deep squat while keeping your spine long.



tuck your tailbone, which will flatten your lower back.

FINISH Your thighs are probably burning by now, but try to stay strong and maintain good posture for several deep breaths. On an inhalation, straighten your legs and rest.

Adjust yourself

Try these modifications to optimize the pose for your body.

Feet Practicing with your feet together will help awaken your inner thigh muscles, but if you're feeling unsteady, try stepping your feet hip-width apart.

Arms This pose demands stamina. If you feel winded, try practicing with your arms straight out in front or down by your sides.

Knees Shift your weight back toward your heels to keep your knees safe. Make sure your knees don't extend forward past your toes.

Chest Lift your chest up and away from your thighs. It helps to imagine leaning your whole torso against the wall behind you.

Neck Keep your head and neck in line with the rest of your spine. Instead of looking up, rest your gaze on the floor a few feet in front of you.

STEP 2



Open your chest and shoulders while stabilizing your spine with a strong core.

Align your upper body

SET IT UP

- ❖ Stand with your back to a wall.
- ❖ Step your feet together, or keep them a few inches apart if you feel unsteady.
- ❖ Lift your arms to shoulder height and spread them shoulder-width apart.
- ❖ Straighten your arms, but draw the heads of your shoulders back into the wall.

REFINE Notice that your shoulders and upper back are touching the wall; your lower back and neck are not—these are places where your spine naturally curves toward the front of the body. Work to maintain (but not exaggerate) these natural curves as you lift your arms. Notice that when you reach your arms up, your ribs and spine will want to follow the arms, jutting forward and producing discomfort in the lower back. Engage your core muscles to stabilize yourself, and gently draw your lower ribs toward the wall. Experiment with how high you can take your arms overhead while keeping your ribs in contact with the wall behind you.

FINISH

Take at least 5 full breaths here, expanding your chest and grounding your legs. On an exhalation, lower your arms and relax.

Elements of practice

In Sanskrit, the word for dedicated practice is *abhyasa*. It means making an effort to reach a goal, wholeheartedly and consistently over time. In yoga, this implies discipline, but it is also a movement toward effortlessness. “Practice” means staying aware of the present moment. This awareness is quickly lost if you get too interested in achieving a pose. Effortlessness arises when you let go of the outcome of practice. You have to make yourself show up, which is hard, but if you stay interested in the practice itself rather than the goal, effortlessness will come.

FINAL POSE

Utkatasana

SET IT UP

- ❖ Begin in Tadasana with your feet together. Spread your weight evenly through your feet.
- ❖ Lift your arms to shoulder height directly in front of your body. Draw the shoulders back, opening your chest.
- ❖ Now lift your arms overhead as high as you can without letting your lower ribs pop out.
- ❖ Bend your knees, coming as close as you can to a right angle while keeping your weight in your heels.

REFINE Recall the feeling of your back against the wall in Step 1 (see page 26) and try to re-create that feeling now. The more deeply you descend as you bend your legs, the more you'll need to lift your lower belly to maintain the balanced curves in your spine. Remember to zip your pubis up toward your navel and to pull in your lower ribs. Keep stretching up through your straight arms even as you reach down with your strong legs and press firmly through your heels. Let your gaze rest on a point just in front of your mat.

FINISH Take a couple more breaths if you can, and on an inhalation, press down to rise up. Straighten your legs and lower your arms, returning to Tadasana. Pause and feel the effects of this powerful pose. ❖



ways of the Warrior

There are many ways to cultivate quiet strength in Virabhadrasana I. Here, teachers of five yoga styles reveal the nuances of Warrior Pose I.

BY HILLARI DOWDLE

For everyone who's ever sweated and groaned their way through Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose I), it may come as no surprise that the pose was named for an ancient warrior, Virabhadra, created by the god Shiva to exact vengeance for the loss of his love, Sati. (Turn to page 47 to read the whole gory love story.)

Many yogis, especially beginners, feel genuinely embattled in Warrior I by its persistent tug-of-war between extension and compression, twist and backbend, internal

and external rotation, and strength and flexibility.

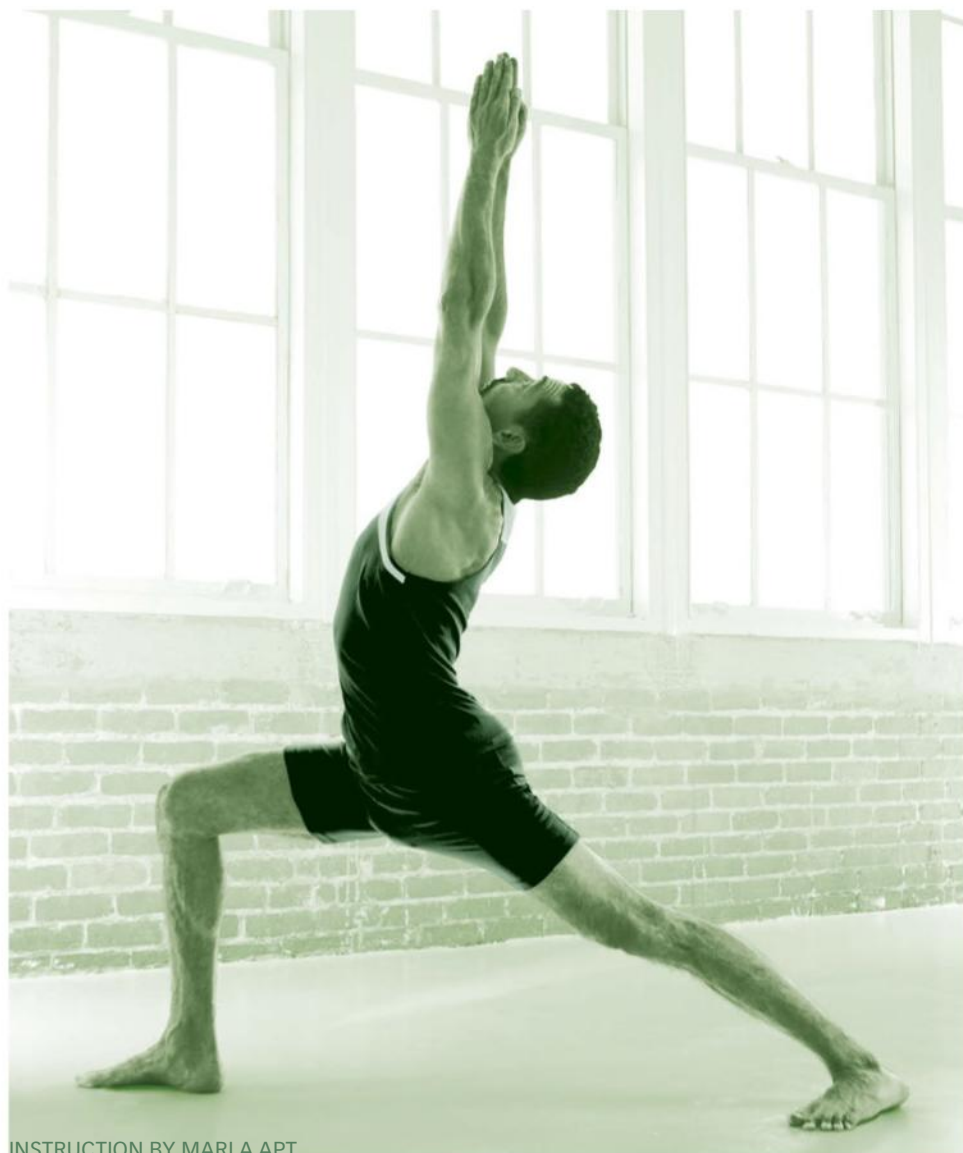
In some ways, that may seem ironic—especially given that the ideal of yoga is *ahimsa*, or nonharming. In other ways, it makes perfect sense, says Richard Rosen, a contributing editor to *Yoga Journal* and a longtime yoga teacher in the Bay Area. “The yogi is really a warrior against his own ignorance,” he says. “Warrior I is about rising out of your own limitations.”

When viewed this way, the pose is about the triumph of the spirit, a universal theme in

yoga. Take Warrior I with understanding and intention, and you are a warrior, ready to fight the good fight.

Like much of asana, the pose comes in many variations. Though the details differ from style to style and yoga class to yoga class, the energy remains the same. Here, five celebrated teachers from different traditions share their own instructions and insights to help you deepen your understanding of the pose so that you can access the power of the warrior within you.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNE HAMERSKY



INSTRUCTION BY MARLA APT

Iyengar

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

Although the story of Virabhadra may be an ancient one, the asana is mostly a modern invention. “Virabhadrasana I is not a posture that’s found in the classical asana texts,” Rosen notes. “It’s not clear where it came from, but it was probably thought up by T. Krishnamacharya about 70 years ago. It’s a 20th-century pose—you can think of it as part of the evolution of asana.”

You can also credit the popularity and form of the posture done today to Krishnamacharya’s student (and brother-in-law) B. K. S. Iyengar, whose conception of the pose and its detailed alignment is

considered by some to be the gold standard in American yoga.

To practice the pose the Iyengar way means finding the proper balance between inspiration and execution. “You can watch Iyengar do the pose, and though it’s fierce, it’s also completely harmonious,” says Marla Apt, a senior-level teacher at the B. K. S. Iyengar Yoga Institute in Los Angeles. “That’s what we want: warrior energy without aggression. Our mind is absorbed in the actions of the pose.”

The actions are many, and Apt’s instruction is filled with fine details. The twist in the upper body comes from the back middle ribs, she says. The back body ascends and moves toward the

FROM TADASANA (Mountain Pose), jump the legs wide apart and extend the arms to the side to make a T, so that the feet land directly under the hands. Turn the upper arms out, palms up, and raise the hands overhead. Lift the sides of the torso toward the fingers while moving the shoulder blades forward to support the lift of the chest. If you can keep the arms straight, join the palms together. Turn the right foot out 90 degrees; turn the left foot and leg strongly inward. Exhale and turn the hips and torso to face the right leg. Bend the right knee to a 90-degree angle, keeping the knee aligned directly over the ankle. Press the back edge of the left heel into the floor and straighten the left leg. Internally rotate the left leg so that the outer thigh rolls forward as you bring the right thigh parallel to the floor. Let the top of the right thighbone descend as you lift the front of the pelvis and abdomen up toward the chest. From the left back ribs, turn the left side of the torso forward. Lift through the sides of the rib cage, the armpits, and the sternum as you look up toward the ceiling.

front body. The abdomen lifts, but the buttocks move down. The tailbone and shoulder blades move forward, but not at the price of causing lumbar compression. The outer edge of the back foot pushes into the floor. The arms are like swords, very sharp, Apt says. The head looks up as if making a triumphant offering to the gods.

Because there is no single point of physical focus in the pose, it demands 100 percent of your attention. “The two sides of the body—left and right—are doing totally different things,” Apt says. “It’s quite sophisticated and a good representation of Iyengar Yoga. We never focus on just one thing; we spread our consciousness everywhere.” >>



INSTRUCTION BY GARY KRAFTSOW

STAND IN TADASANA (Mountain Pose) at the back of the mat. Step the right foot forward to create a stance that's long but allows you to easily shift your weight forward and back. Feet are hip-width apart. Inhale as you simultaneously bend the right knee, draw the shoulders back, and lift the arms forward and overhead, fingers interlocked and palms facing upward. Keep the upper arms in line with the ears. Move the chest slightly forward, displacing it in front of the hips to bring the arch into the upper back. Lift the sternum away from the navel. Keeping the weight firmly and evenly pressing through both feet, gaze forward with the chin level. Exhale, lower the arms, straighten the right leg, and return to the starting point. On the next inhalation, bend the leg and re-enter the pose, retaining the breath for 2 seconds. Continue to move in and out of the pose with the breath 5 more times. Release the pose, and repeat it on the other side.

Viniyoga

AN ASANA FOR EVERY BODY

Gary Kraftsow, founder of the American Viniyoga Institute, considers Warrior I a greatest-hits asana. "If there are 10 or 15 postures that are core for all human beings, this is one of them," he says. "It strengthens the legs and back, realigns the spine, stretches the psoas, opens the hips, creates stability in the hip joints, and deepens respiration. It can be seen as a symbol of increasing self-confidence and courage."

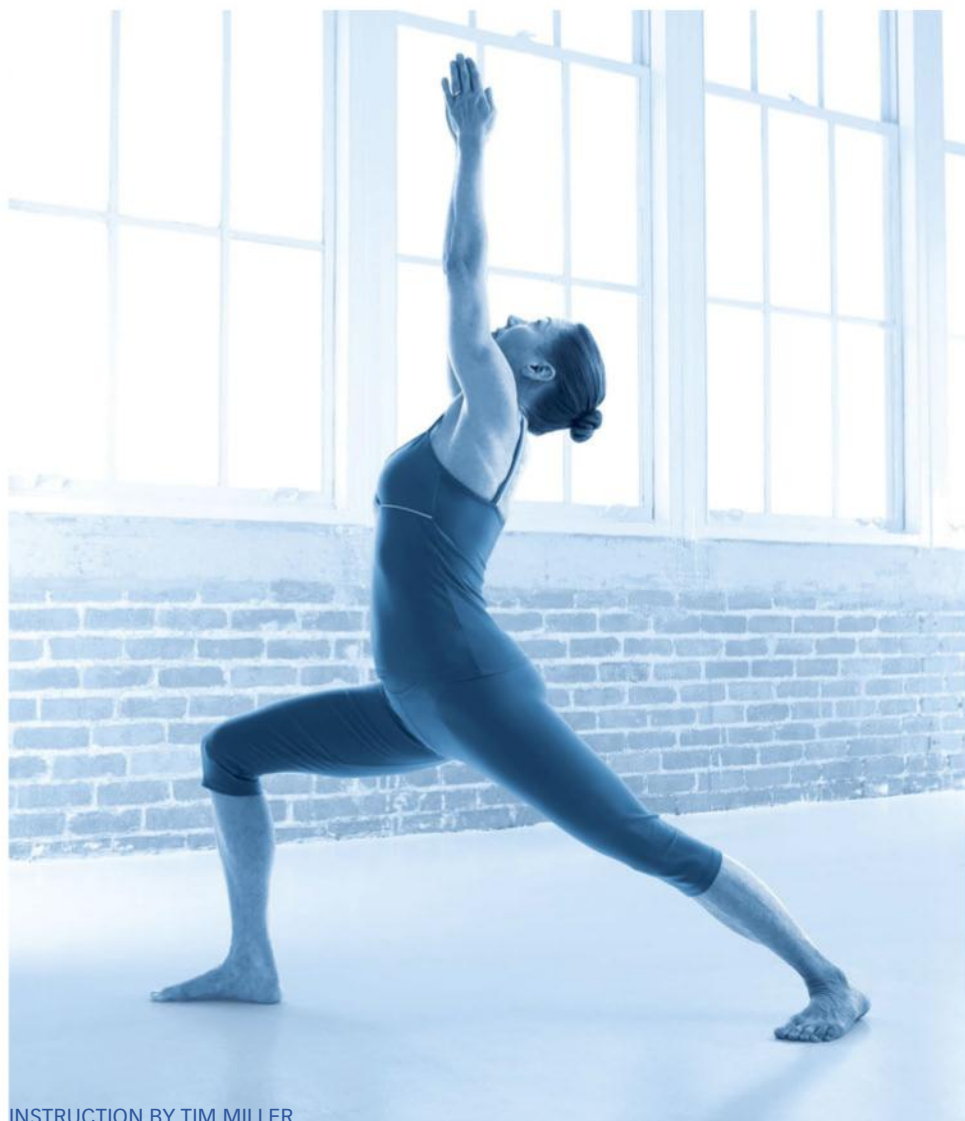
In the Viniyoga tradition, asana is often used therapeutically and taught one-on-one, so the teacher will vary the pose depending on the individual. "There is no correct or incorrect way of

doing Virabhadrasana I—in fact, there are as many variations on the pose as there are people practicing it," Kraftsow notes. "The pose can be done in different ways to achieve different functional potentials in the body."

Variations include the width and length of the stance, the arm and head positions, the depth of the bend in the front knee, the relative rotation of the back leg, and the relationship between the hips and shoulders. "If you have a wide stance with the front thigh parallel to the floor, it can help build strength in the legs," he explains. "If you make the stance shorter, keep the arms parallel to the floor, and pull the shoulder blades toward each other, it helps to flatten thoracic kyphosis [an excessive

curve in the upper back]. If you rest the same-side arm on the front leg and displace the chest forward and up, raising the other arm, it can help you access and stretch the iliopsoas muscles." And these are just three among the nearly endless physical variations.

Kraftsow explains that these modern adaptations of Warrior I are based on an ancient Indian martial-arts stance. "In a martial situation, you'd be able to advance or retreat without using excess energy," he says. "The pose should be long but allow you to step forward or back easily. The center of gravity is low, so you're stable and grounded on your feet. The chest is open in a symbol of courage, and you gaze directly forward across the battlefield."



INSTRUCTION BY TIM MILLER

START IN Adho Mukha Svana-sana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). Step the right leg forward and plant it 4 feet directly in front of the left foot, with the heels aligned. The right foot points forward; the left foot is angled 30 degrees inward. Bend the right knee so that the thigh is parallel to the floor. Keep the outer edge of the back foot pressing into the floor. Extend the spine upward from the coccyx, lifting the arms to the sides and overhead. Square the torso to the front. Engage the pelvic floor and lift the pubic bone toward the navel to engage the *bandhas* (energy locks). Inhale as you sweep the arms to the sides and overhead. Press the palms together and look up, directing your gaze steadily at your thumbs (this visual focus is called *drishti*). Allow the mind to become quiet. With each breath, come into the pose more deeply by gradually increasing the bend of the right leg to align the knee with the tips of the toes.

Ashtanga

GO WITH THE FLOW

Warrior I is perhaps the defining pose in Ashtanga Yoga's B-series Sun Salutation, or Surya Namaskar B. "In Ashtanga, we usually run through Virabhadrasana I several times as we repeat each side in Surya Namaskar B," explains Tim Miller, director of San Diego's Ashtanga Yoga Center. "It all happens quickly, so you are not spending a lot of time considering the biomechanics of the pose. It's more about doing it in the flow."

The flow is what Ashtanga is all about. "The benefit is that it gets you out of your head," Miller says. "It's a more right-brained approach. It's not about trying to figure everything out—there

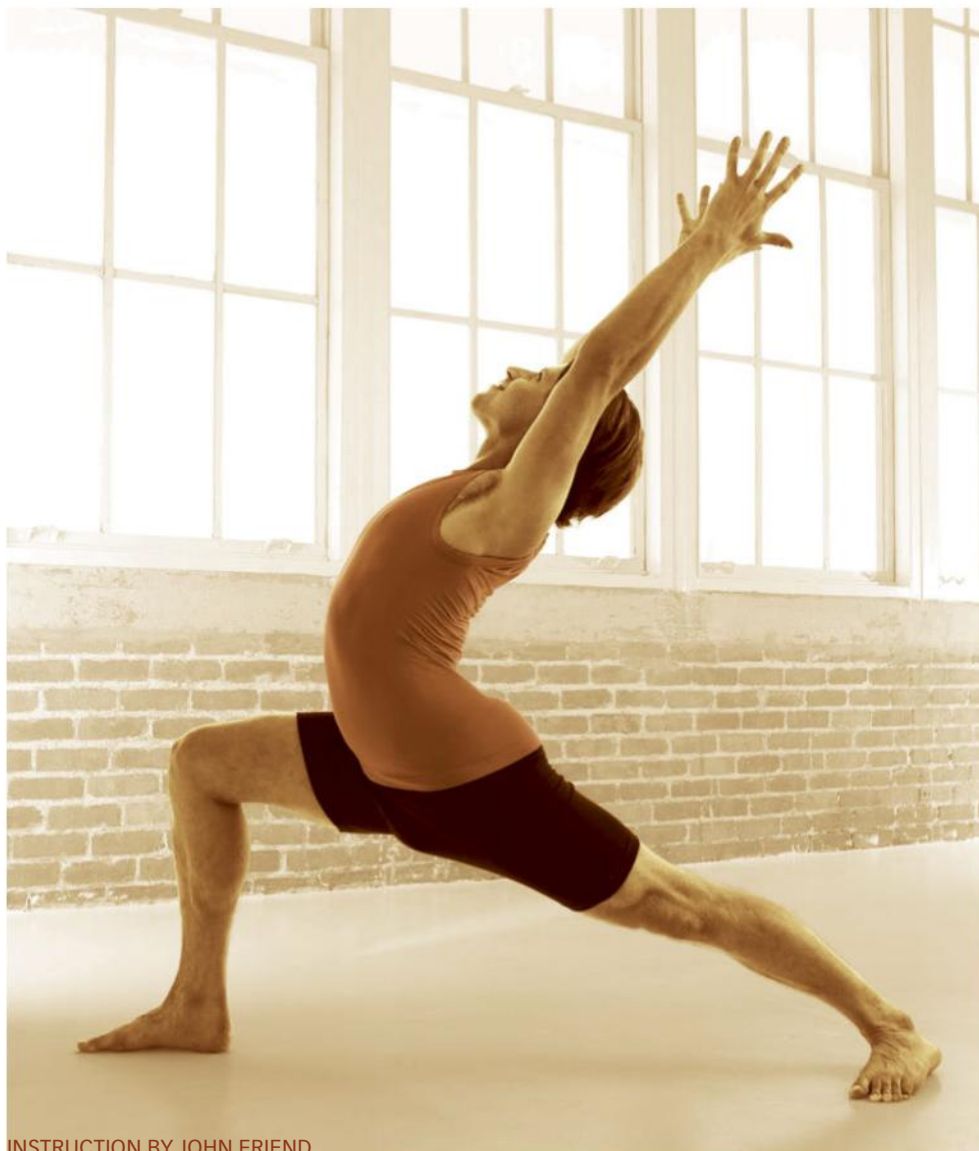
is no one right way. Which is not to say that you want to do the pose sloppily."

Most of the fine points of the Ashtanga pose are familiar: front leg bent 90 degrees, back leg straight and outer foot pressed down, hips square to the front, arms overhead. But there's one key difference: In Ashtanga Yoga, as taught by K. Pattabhi Jois, another student of T. Krishnamacharya's, the front knee extends beyond the ankle, in line with the tips of the toes. This is the ultimate goal for the pose, but it may not be safe or accessible for every student, Miller points out.

Practiced this way, the pose has a benefit that transcends the physical, according to Miller. "By going deeper into the front leg, you get more into the area

around the sacrum and are able to access the *granthis*," he says. The *granthis* are energetic knots that block the flow of prana in the body. You can think of them as places where you feel "tangled up." There are three: Brahma granthi, the physical knot headquartered in the sacrum; Vishnu granthi, the emotional knot centered in the heart; and Shiva granthi, the mental knot associated with the third eye.

Warrior I addresses all three simultaneously. "The physical nature of the pose addresses Brahma granthi, the focus on the breath addresses the emotional knot in the chest, and the idea of *drishti* [focal point] addresses the mental knot," Miller says. "It's a whole package that works on an energetic level." >>



INSTRUCTION BY JOHN FRIEND

WITH WARRIOR POWER, place the feet 4 to 5 feet apart. Stretch your arms to the sides. Lift your chest, turn your right (front) foot out 90 degrees, and swivel on your back heel to point the toes slightly inward. Heels are aligned. With the left leg rooted, turn the hips toward the front of the mat. With Muscular Energy, draw both legs in toward the midline, and plug the arm bones into the shoulder sockets as you lift the arms to the sky. Draw the shoulder blades down the back and curl them in toward the heart as you lift victoriously through the chest. Bend your right leg to a 90-degree angle, knee aligned over the ankle. Spiral the left thigh in and draw the outer right hip back and down. Counterbalance by spiraling the right thigh slightly outward. Imagine the source of your Organic Energy as a luminous orb in the pelvis where the tailbone meets the sacrum—from here, root down and extend up toward the top of the head as you curl your throat slightly back. Keeping a natural curve in the neck, lengthen and look up, remembering the divine source of the warrior power.

Anusara

GODDESS POWERED

In Anusara Yoga, the pose is inseparable from the legend that inspired it; tease the two apart, and it's simply not yoga, says Anusara founder John Friend. "I saw some guys in the park doing lunges with their arms up, and they were just building their butts," he says. "When you are doing Warrior I, you *are* toning muscles, but you're also expressing your spirit through your body in a triumphant way."

Friend points to five main actions in the pose—each of which corresponds to one of Anusara Yoga's five Universal Principles of Alignment. "The first of these is *Opening to Grace*—you have

to remember the Universal," he says. "Virabhadra is strong only because he comes from God. Remembering this, the inner body grows lustrous, and the outer body can simply drape down onto this inner light."

Once you're in the posture, the next principle is *Muscular Energy*. "You are always hugging in toward the middle—squeezing into the source of your power," he says. This translates into a scissoring action in the legs.

Third, *Inner Spiral*: "The back leg turns inward so that the thighbone moves back and the hips widen," Friend says. "This will allow the back hip to turn more readily to the front." And the fourth principle, *Outer Spiral*: "The

Outer Spiral is emphasized on the front thigh to bring the legs closer together and draw the tailbone forward," he says. "It balances the effects of the Inner Spiral."

Finally, *Organic Energy*. "Create a Focal Point in the pelvis—picture a small orb of light at the area where the tailbone meets the sacrum," Friend instructs. "From there, everything extends out and shines like the sun."

The key to the pose is the first principle, Friend says. "When you brighten up on the inside and relax on the outside, you don't have to work so hard," he concludes. "The pose should be a full expression of one's intention, which might be to honor the universal creative power—the Shakti."



INSTRUCTION BY RICHARD FAULDS

STAND IN TADASANA (Mountain Pose). With your hands on your hips, exhale and take a big step forward with the right foot, keeping the feet hip-width apart. The left heel is off the mat. Bend the right knee, letting the hips sink toward the floor. Keep the right knee directly over the ankle (slide the left foot back, if necessary, to create a strong base posture). Square the hips to the front of the mat, moving the left hipbone forward and the right hipbone back. Press back through the lifted left heel to engage the leg muscles and straighten the leg. Inhale and sweep the arms out to the sides and overhead, shoulder-width apart and palms facing in. Let the hips sink toward the floor as you lift the sternum, extending through the crown and pressing the fingertips toward the ceiling. Gaze straight ahead.

Kripalu

STRONG AND SOFT

Of all the schools in American yoga, three major ones—Bikram, Kundalini, and Kripalu—do *not* flow from Krishnamacharya. Though it shares its name and mythology with other traditions, the Kripalu Warrior was received by divine inspiration during Swami Kripalu's practice in the 1950s. "Our tradition holds that if you meditate deeply enough, hatha yoga will emerge from the inside out," explains Richard Faulds, director of yoga development at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and author of *Kripalu Yoga: A Guide to Practice On and Off the Mat*. "That's what happened to

Swami Kripalu. At age 38, his kundalini energy awoke, and his body spontaneously performed all of these postures."

The pose that Swami Kripalu taught differs in one key detail: The back heel stays off the ground. Not that the physical specifics are the most important thing. "We see postures as tools to open and awaken presence in the body," Faulds says. "The question we always ask in Kripalu Yoga is: What does the posture bring forth in you?"

The answer is individual and personal. But, in general, Warrior I invites a sense of empowerment. "The posture makes you simultaneously strong and openhearted, even vulnerable," Faulds explains. "You need will to bring your energy and mental

power to bear on the world. But you also need to be able to surrender enough to see the opportunities in life naturally. Many of us struggle to find that balance."

The pose is terrific for exploring the difficult emotions that can hold you back from life's full expression, Faulds explains. "The strength you tap into in Warrior I can also bring up anger, frustration, and hostility," he notes. "In the pose, we can let those energies build—we can let ourselves feel them fully. We learn to ride the waves of emotion and sensation, so that the pose becomes a safe space for our feelings to play out." ❖

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plumb Perfect

By Roger Cole

Photography by John Robbins

One-legged poses give us a chance to find our center of gravity and dance around its edges. Here's how to put an end to the wobbling and create a sense of fluid stability.

When yoga master B. K. S. Iyengar visited the San Diego Zoo in 1990, he was struck by the effortless aplomb of the flamingos. He pointed to a gaudy pink bird as it balanced on one leg, as steady as a boulder. Oblivious to its squawking neighbors, beak tucked under its feathers, the flamingo was fast asleep. Surveying the group of yoga teachers accompanying him, Iyengar playfully challenged them: "Can you relax like that?"

The answer, of course, was no. For humans, nodding off while balancing on one leg is out of the question. There's no faking it: The instant we lose focus, we fall over. Standing on one foot, we naturally drop extraneous thoughts to focus on the task at hand. That's why practicing balancing postures can instill a deep sense of calm even though it requires intense, unwavering alertness.

When we balance, we align our body's center of gravity with the earth's gravitational field. Quite literally, we place ourselves in physical equilibrium with a fundamental force of nature. But we can't achieve this harmony by remaining absolutely still. Instead, we must refresh our balance moment by moment. The sustained effort to center and recenter brings not only our flesh and bones into balance but also our nerve impulses, thoughts, emotions, and very consciousness. Hence, we feel calm. Equilibrium brings equanimity.

Lack of equilibrium brings just the opposite. There is something uniquely frustrating about losing our balance in

one-legged postures. It goes beyond the instinctive fear of falling and strikes directly at the ego. After all, we rarely tumble to the ground and hurt ourselves; we simply put our other foot down. Yet that simple act can be maddening.

If we fall out of Vrksasana (Tree Pose) when practicing alone, we often hear an internal critic saying, "What's wrong with you? You should be able to do this!" If we're in a class, the same fall can bring a sense of humiliation that's greatly disproportionate to the physical event. We feel out of control when we lose our balance, and the ego hates to lose control—especially when other people are around to see it.

Despite the frustration, one-legged balancing asanas offer so many benefits that it's well worth the trouble to practice them. In addition to promoting concentration and calm, these poses strengthen our muscles and build our coordination and balance, improving our ways of standing and walking as well as how we perform many other everyday activities. And these benefits might actually prolong our lives, helping us avoid the falls that often lead to injuries and death among the elderly.

The three essential elements of balance are alignment, strength, and attention. Alignment of the body with gravity is crucial; it makes balance physically possible. Strength gives us the power to create, hold, and adjust alignment. And attention continually monitors alignment so we know how to correct it from one moment to the next.



Parivrtta Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana

(Revolved Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose)

Stand with your feet together in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Spread your toes and broaden both feet on the floor. Shift your weight onto your left foot; then lift your right foot and shift your hips farther to the left. Grip the outer edge of the right foot with the left hand (or wrap a strap around the ball of the right foot and hold it in the left hand). Lower your right hip as close as possible to the level of the left one; keep it here throughout the pose. As you inhale, lift your chest and make the spine tall. As you exhale, simultaneously perform each of the following actions: Lift and straighten your right leg diagonally up and to the left, twist your trunk to the right, and reach your right hand out to the right, parallel to the floor. Strongly grip the muscles of your outer left hip to stabilize your pelvis. Hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds (or even longer as you grow stronger and more stable).

When you stand with two feet on the floor, as in Tadasana (Mountain Pose), your weight is evenly distributed on either side of your midline—that imaginary plumb line that runs from the crown of your head down to the floor. It's pretty easy to balance here. But the moment you lift your right foot off the floor and start to draw your right knee out to the side for Tree Pose, everything changes. Your base of support becomes narrower; now it's just your left foot. And the weight of your leg swinging out to the right moves your center of gravity to the right, so it's no longer on your midline. To compensate, you automatically shift your whole body to the left, working to bring your center of gravity back onto the new plumb line that runs through your new base of support.

To find balance, you must distribute your body weight in

Alignment

the physics of balance

equilibrium on either side of the plumb line. But that doesn't necessarily mean placing equal weight on each side of the line. Think of two people of unequal weight trying to balance a seesaw. They can balance if the lighter one sits farther out and the heavier one sits closer to the center. In yoga, the same principles apply: A light part of the body farther from the center of gravity can counterbalance a heavier part that's closer to the center. As you raise the weight of your right leg higher off the floor, you shift your hips and torso slightly to the left.

You may notice that Vrksasana becomes more difficult when you bring your hands to heart center or overhead. That's because each of these movements raises your center of gravity. When the center of gravity is high, just a few degrees of tilt can move it far enough off the plumb line to upset your balance; when it is low, there's more room for error. If you have trouble balancing in Vrksasana, try lowering your center of gravity by practicing the pose with your standing-leg knee slightly bent and your arms in a lower position. You can also enhance your equilibrium in these poses by spreading the toes and the ball of the standing foot. The broader your base, the more stable you are, and even the slightest widening of the sole of the foot is surprisingly helpful.

If you're wobbly in Vrksasana, you can try actively pressing down into the big-toe ball of the foot and the inner heel. This causes a rebound up through your body and shifts your center of gravity toward the outer edge of your foot. Such skillful use of your muscles is an important part of balancing. Your bones can't put themselves into line with gravity; they need the muscles to move them into position, hold them there, and reposition them as needed. This is where strength comes into the picture.



Vrksasana (Tree Pose)

Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose), lifting your spine. Spread your toes and broaden both feet on the floor. To find your center of gravity, bring your attention an inch or two below your navel and deep inside your body. Shift this point slightly forward and back, then from side to side, making ever smaller movements until you come to rest at center. When you're correctly aligned, you'll feel weight placed evenly on the heels and balls of the feet and on the inner and outer edges of the feet. You'll also feel a sense of lightness.

Then shift your pelvis to the left until your center of gravity lies directly above the middle of your left foot. Lift your right foot and place it as high as possible on your left inner thigh, toes pointing down. Press your right foot against your left thigh, and your thigh against your foot. Lower your right hip until it is level with the left; this movement will require you to again shift your hips significantly to the left. Contract your right buttock, draw your right knee back without drawing your right hip back, and bring your hands into prayer position at your heart. Keep your gaze soft and level. As needed, firmly but gently press the inner or outer edge of the foot into the floor to shift your center of gravity directly above your left foot. When your center is properly placed, you'll feel a sense of lightness, just as you did in Tadasana. Hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds (or even longer as you grow stronger and more stable).



Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana

(Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation

Stand in Tadasana. Spread your toes and broaden both feet on the floor. Shift your weight onto your left foot; lift your right foot and shift your hips farther to the left. Reaching your right arm to the inside of your right knee, grasp the right big toe with your index and middle fingers. (If you are less flexible, hold a strap looped around the ball of your foot.) Lift your right knee as high as possible without lifting the hip. Simultaneously perform the following three actions, carefully balancing them across the plumb line of your body and working to constantly equalize the weight on the inner and outer sides of your standing foot: (1) Lower your right hip as close as possible to the level of the left hip, (2) lift and straighten your right leg diagonally up and to the right, and (3) place your left hand on your left hip. Strongly grip the muscles of your outer left hip to stabilize your pelvis. Without moving either hip forward or back, strongly contract your right buttock muscles and pull your right foot back to bring a stretch to your right inner thigh. Lift your spine and stand tall. Feeling how your calf and shin muscles frequently contract to correct your balance, fine-tune your position so it requires the fewest possible muscular corrections. Hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds (or even longer as you grow stronger and more stable).

Two muscles do most of the work in keeping us from falling over in any balancing posture: the gluteus medius and the gluteus minimus. The gluteus medius connects the outer rim of the pelvis to the upper thighbone; the gluteus minimus lies underneath the medius. The best way to strengthen these crucial muscles is—you guessed it—to practice lots and lots of one-legged standing poses! All the poses discussed in this article will help; each will work the muscles in a somewhat different way. Try holding each posture with the support of a wall or ledge so you can hold it for a long time without losing your balance. Hold it until muscle fatigue causes you to lose proper positioning of your limbs or trunk. Then come down and practice on the other side. You'll get even better results if you repeat this process several times.

Strength

the power to balance

Smaller muscles are also important in helping you balance in poses like Vrksasana and Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose). When you stand in them, you'll probably find your foot and ankle making frequent side-to-side adjustments. The inner foot presses down (pronation), then the outer foot (supination), then the inner foot again, and so on. If you pay attention to this involuntary small dance, you'll see that pressing down the outer edge of the foot shifts the body's center of gravity toward the inner foot, and vice versa.

Being narrow, the foot has very poor leverage for shifting the entire mass of the body left and right. The muscles that press the inner and outer foot down must therefore be quite strong to move the center of gravity far enough—and fast enough—to maintain balance. The primary muscles involved are the tibialis anterior (on the outer front shin) for supination, and the peroneus longus and brevis (on the outer calf) for pronation. The supinators are strengthened by almost every standing pose, one-legged and two-legged alike. The pronators are strengthened more by one-legged standing poses, especially Vrksasana, in which they help offset the tendency to overbalance toward the inner foot.

The better you get at balance poses, the less muscular effort you need to maintain them. This is because you become more skilled at using your bone structure to support your weight, rather than wasting muscle energy to do so. You also waver less, so you need to make fewer and smaller muscular corrections. Such finesse often depends on practicing other poses to gain adequate flexibility, which allows you to place your center of gravity in the most favorable position. If you find yourself clenching the floor with your toes, white-knuckled, there's a good chance you're using too much brawn and not enough brain.

Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose)

Take Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose) to the right. To move into Ardha Chandrasana, bend your right knee toward your right foot and slide your left foot along the floor until you can center your weight above your right foot. Place your right hand on the floor beyond your right toes and to their right. Keeping your right knee bent and your left leg straight and firm, lift your left leg until your heel is slightly higher than your hip. Place the leg in line with your hips, angling neither forward nor back. Keeping your right knee bent, rotate the front of your pelvis up toward the ceiling by contracting the right buttock where it joins the leg. Then carefully turn the rest of the upper body toward the ceiling, one part at a time, in this order: waist, chest, shoulders, neck and head together, and finally, eyes. During this turning process, imagine a vertical plane centered on your standing foot and running through your entire body. Rotate in a way that keeps your body—especially your pelvis—bisected by this plane. Straighten your standing leg only after all the other aspects of the pose are complete. Equalize your weight between the heel and ball of the foot. Hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds (or even longer as you grow stronger and stabler).





The price of balance is constant attention. Think of all the actions you must coordinate to remain stable in a pose like Ardha Chandrasana. You must keep your center of gravity under close observation and tight control to maintain its precarious position above its narrow base of support: the standing foot. To manage this, your nervous system must stay on its toes and do some fancy footwork. It

keeps repeating three steps: monitoring your position, calculating any necessary corrections, and directing these adjustments.

To monitor your position, your nervous system has to answer the questions “Which way is up?” and “Where is my body?” It has several ways to do this. Before you turn your head to look up in Ardha Chandrasana, your eyes collect data about your position from the horizon line or wall in front of you. The

semicircular canals, which are balance organs in the inner ear, also help you find “up” by feeling the downward pull of gravity. And pressure sensors on the bottoms of your feet detect which way you are tilting. To indicate body position,

nerve endings in your joints signal the angle of your limbs, trunk, neck, and head. Nerve endings in your muscles and tendons detect force and stretch, and others in your skin detect stretch and pressure. In addition, your eyes provide visual information about the location of various body parts. From all of this sensory input, you can tell whether your body is where you want it to be—for example, whether your lifted leg is too far forward or back for an optimal Ardha Chandrasana. You can also tell not only where you are in space but which way you are moving and how quickly.

To calculate corrections, your brain adds up all of this information, compares it with an image of where it wants your body to be, and does some heavy number-crunching to decide which movements to make. To direct the needed adjustments, your brain and spinal cord do additional computations and send nerve signals to dozens of muscles, telling them to contract or relax as needed. As you make these movements, your sensory systems constantly monitor the results and start the cycle of correction over again.

That’s a lot of work. No wonder it’s a challenge to balance and chew gum at the same time! Let’s look at how this complex process affects your practice.

If you’re like most people, you depend primarily on visual input to maintain your balance. Have you ever tried balancing on one foot with your eyes closed? If so, the odds are that you

couldn’t stay there for long. You’ve probably gotten so good at using your eyes for balance that you don’t bother to use the other systems you have available.

Now think about what happens when you practice Ardha Chandrasana outdoors. If you direct your gaze toward the horizon, you can probably balance, but if you turn and look up at the open sky, you may quickly lose your equilibrium. Even though your eyes are open, you no longer see a fixed point of reference to tell you which way is up or which way you are moving.

Another reason it’s hard to look up in Ardha Chandrasana, even indoors, is that turning your head changes the position of the balance organs in your inner ears with respect to gravity. Nerve impulses that used to mean “up” and “down” now mean something different. Your brain needs time to reinterpret all of these messages. If it doesn’t adapt to the new conditions rapidly enough, you may fall over. One way to overcome this problem is to turn your head very slowly and incrementally, pausing to rebalance at various points along the way. Another good approach is to focus your attention on the sensations from your standing foot, ankle, and hip, allowing them to guide

your balance as you turn your head.

Since the brain compares your actual position with an image of where you want to be, it helps to have a pretty precise internal image. And some mental pictures are, of course, more helpful than

others. One very useful image is your old friend, the plumb line that runs vertically up from the center of your standing foot. If you can develop a strong internal sense of this line, it will help your nervous system calibrate movements that maintain equilibrium around the line.

In Ardha Chandrasana, it’s helpful to expand the concept of a plumb line to a plumb *plane*. Imagine that the plumb line lies on a flat, vertical surface, like an infinitely thin wall, that divides your standing foot in half lengthwise and runs up through your body. Concentrate on keeping your head, trunk, pelvis, and both of your legs balanced on either side of this plane. But don’t abandon the plumb line; you still need it to keep your standing leg from leaning too far back toward your heel or forward toward your toes.

At a higher level of the nervous system, your attitude toward practicing balancing poses has a tremendous effect on your success. Approach them seriously and with determination, but also with good humor, patience, and curiosity, like a child learning to stand. If you can laugh when you wobble or when you fall yet be ready to try the pose again in earnest, you have found true balance in your practice. ❀

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Attention

focus on balance



STRETCH THE ARMS AWAY
FROM EACH OTHER

BROADEN AND
LENGTHEN THE CHEST

STRAIGHTEN BOTH
LEGS AND KEEP
QUADRICEPS FIRM

TURN THE FRONT THIGH
AND KNEE OUT

The Right Angle

Learn proper alignment in this pose and lay a powerful foundation for your whole practice.

UTTHITA TRIKONASANA (Extended Triangle Pose) looks like its name. You can see several triangles in the pose: Your hands and back foot

are the points of one; your two feet are points of another; and your torso, arm, and front leg form the sides of yet another. One of the first poses yoga students learn, Triangle teaches you to feel firmness in your legs, a lengthening of your spine, fullness in your chest, and freedom in your neck and shoulders. Triangle also increases the flexibility and strength of your legs and lower joints (ankles, knees, and hips). If you have tight hamstrings, forward bends might aggravate lower-back pain, but Triangle provides a safe way to stretch the legs while extending the back sideways.

When I first attempted Triangle, I thought that if I could reach my hand to the floor, *voilà!* I was done. I was not yet aware that in reaching to the floor, I had sacrificed the alignment of other body parts. My knees drooped, my hips flew backward, and my shoulder slumped forward. I had yet to learn to use my muscles to support me so that I had a strong foundation from which to extend.

BUILD A BASE

The main triangle you can see in the pose is the one at the bottom, where the floor is the base and your legs are the sides. The feet and floor form the foundation of the structure. Beginners often immediately reach their hands to the floor, as I did, but sacrifice the stability of the foundation. Take time to create a firm, balanced, stable base.

PRESS THE OUTER EDGE OF THE
BACK HEEL INTO THE FLOOR



DON'T let the front knee turn inward and drop.



DO turn the front thigh outward.



Figure 2 (variation of Trikonasana) is described on page 44.

Your bones form the frame of the pose, and your muscles help align the bones. B. K. S. Iyengar said that in Trikonasana you need to “entwine the muscles to the bone,” which means that the quadriceps, calves, and gluteal muscles must be actively engaged. When your muscles are

firm, they “hug” the bones and support the skeletal structure. Straightening the legs may not, at first, seem difficult, but the challenge lies in doing so without collapsing into the ankles, knees, or hips. You’re collapsing if it feels as if most of your weight is on your front knee or shin.

pose benefits

Increases flexibility and strength in the legs, ankles, knees, and hips

Stretches the hips, groins, hamstrings, and calves

Opens the shoulders and chest; extends the spine

Improves digestion

Relieves lower-back pain and stiff neck

contraindications

Knee pain

Neck problems

High blood pressure

Low blood pressure

Heart conditions

Your upper body should feel as though it is lifting off your lower body. As you ground your back leg and heel, lift the front of your pelvis toward the ceiling. Your abdomen and sternum should extend toward your head. Your arms are straight and firm in this pose. Your bottom arm doesn’t bear much weight, but it helps you extend. It should feel as though your arms are reaching apart from the center of your chest. Lengthen the bottom side of your rib cage to be as long as the upper side so that both are parallel to the floor.

When you roll your shoulders away from your ears and turn your chest toward the ceiling, you can turn your head to look at the uplifted hand. If your neck hurts, look forward instead and work on opening the chest by moving your back ribs and shoulder blades into the chest while rolling the shoulders back.

BE A WALLFLOWER

It’s challenging to incorporate all of these



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standing & balancing

nuances into the pose. So, to begin, it's good to practice at a wall (*see figure 1*), which will help you stay balanced and grounded in the back leg. Stand on your mat and spread your legs wide apart, with your arms stretched out to the sides at shoulder height. See that your right foot is directly under the right hand. Place the outer edge of your left heel against the wall. Turn the toes of the left foot slightly away from the wall so that only the outer edge of the heel touches the wall. Turn the right leg completely out so that the knee faces away from the wall.

Place your hands on your hips and lift the sides of the torso and chest up. Now raise the arms again, maintain the height of your torso, and stretch the arms out from the sides of the chest. From the feet, draw the thighs up toward the hip sockets. Balance the weight evenly between the inner and outer edges of the feet and align ankle, knee, and hip with the center of the foot so that as you engage your leg muscles, you feel as though one joint is lifted off the other in a single-file line.

Keeping your legs straight and firm, press the outer left heel into the wall and down into the floor while extending your torso over your right leg. When your trunk extends over your front leg in Triangle, you may find yourself putting too much weight on that leg. The weight should be distributed evenly on both legs. Press the heel into the wall to help maintain awareness of the back leg.

Clasp your ankle or shin with your right hand and place your left hand on your left hip. Now see if you can firm the entire left leg and put power into the left heel. Take your right hand only as low as you can without losing the weight on the left outer heel. To come out of the pose, press the left heel down and use the left leg to help pull you up. Repeat the pose on the other side, with the right heel pressing against the wall.

HAND YOURSELF A PROP

Once you feel stable on the back leg, try the pose away from the wall, but place a block on the floor to the outside of your front ankle (*see figure 2*). Separate the feet as you did before and turn the legs to the right. Look at your right kneecap to see

angles of repose

In Tantric yoga philosophy, the *sri yantra* is the geometrical representation of the creation of the cosmos. It is a symbol or picture with nine interlocking triangles surrounding a *bindu*, or point. The upward-facing triangles represent aspiration toward the transcendental, and the inverted triangles represent the source of energy and the root of life. When the two are connected, multiple triangles emerge, signifying the web of existence.

Yantras are often used as an aid to meditation, in which the practitioner visualizes the graphic image to steady the mind and make it run along a path of spiritual alignment. As an asana practitioner, you can try to embody the

yantra in a pose like Trikonasana. Your body forms several triangles, and you seek the yantric ideal of straight, clean lines to access the union of material and spiritual impulses. The material impulse manifests as a concern for physical well-being and helps you to be cautious when practicing. The spiritual impulse spurs you on to courageously seek greater depth and intensity.

As you carve the many triangles with your body, you learn to balance the qualities of firmness and release, stability and mobility, expansion and contraction. In the practices of visualizing the yantra and aligning yourself in the pose, the mind is brought to a state of meditation.

that it is facing over the middle toe of the right foot. Pull the right leg up from the ankle to the hip. The muscles of the thigh and around the outer hips should feel as though they are gripping the bones and turning the upper leg out, pulling the thigh up and into the hip socket. Keep the knee and hip in line with the heel.

See if you can maintain the firmness of the left leg and the pressure on the left outer heel as you exhale and extend to the right to take your right hand to the block. If your palm doesn't quite reach, you can place your fingertips on the block. Don't lean on the block, but push off it with the right hand to extend upward through the chest and left arm. Keep both legs firm, extend your arms, come up on the inhalation, and move your block to the left to repeat on the other side.

Stability comes with the evenness in both feet; the strength, straightness, and rotation of the front leg; a strong upward lifting action of both legs; and a firmness of the back leg and heel. The result is freedom that allows the pelvis, abdomen, and chest to lift and turn toward the ceiling. Lengthen both sides of your torso over the right leg so that the right side of your rib cage feels as long as the left side. Firm the muscles of the upper right arm to draw them upward and feel the lifting of the chest and extension of the left arm to

the ceiling. Now, extend your arms away from each other and broaden your chest.

ON YOUR OWN

Use what you have learned in the previous variations to determine how low you can go without sacrificing the integrity of the pose. If you can't reach the floor but feel you can go lower than the block, clasp your ankle with your hand. If your chest and abdomen turn toward the floor, raise your hand higher up the shin. Remember that the chest should remain broad and open in the pose.

First-timers tend to lean slightly forward and push the right hip backward so that they don't fall back and out of the pose. Take your right outer hip forward, bring your torso in line with your legs and hips, roll both shoulders back as if you had a wall behind you, and revolve your chest toward the ceiling. The back body should feel firm and stable, like a wall that supports the front body.

In Triangle Pose, as in all asanas, you will learn to balance the dualities of courage and caution. As you form various triangles with your body, perhaps you will glimpse the connections between firmness and extension and creation and freedom. ❖

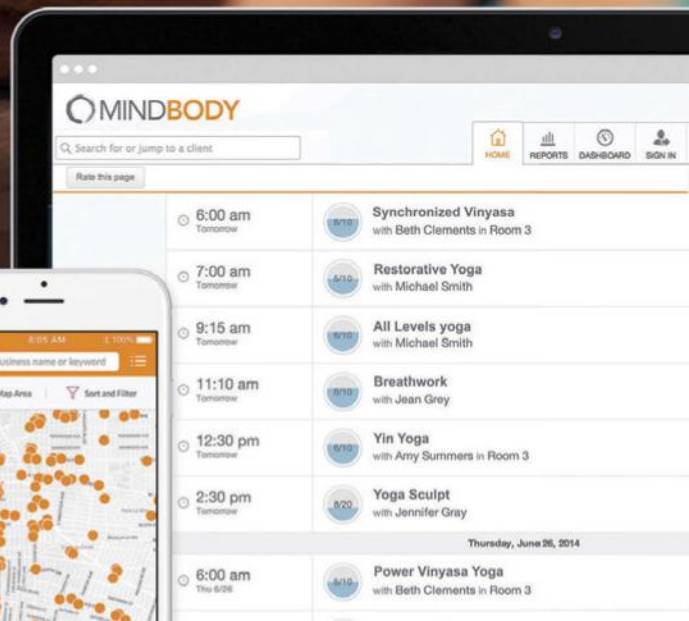
Marla Apt is a certified Iyengar Yoga teacher based in Los Angeles.

A man and a woman are sitting in a meditative pose on a wooden floor in a yoga studio. The man is in the foreground, wearing a grey t-shirt and dark shorts, with his eyes closed and hands resting on his knees. The woman is behind him, wearing a yellow tank top and dark pants, also in a meditative pose. The background shows wooden walls and other people in the background.

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STRAIGHTEN ARMS TO
SIDES, PARALLEL TO FLOOR

LENGTHEN SIDES.....
OF TORSO EVENLY

ALIGN KNEE OVER HEEL

Stand Strong

Come into your power as you connect with the warrior Virabhadra.

THE STANDING POSE Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II) is standard practice in most yoga classes. But few yogis know the tale of its genesis. In Hindu lore, the powerful priest Daksha threw a huge sacrifice and invited everyone — except his youngest daughter, Sati, and her good-for-nothing yogi husband, Shiva, whom Daksha despised (even if Shiva was supreme ruler of the universe). Sati was livid. In one version of the story, she stormed over to the sacrificial fire and threw herself in to teach her father a lesson; in another, her ire was so intense that she spontaneously combusted. Shiva was devastated by his beloved's immolation and went berserk. When he yanked out a tuft of his hair and beat it into the ground, up popped a nightmarish creature with “a thousand heads, a thousand feet, a thousand eyes, a thousand hands, with fangs terrible to behold.” It was armed to the teeth and invincible. Meet Virabhadra, whose name means “blessed hero,” though typically it's rendered into English simply as “warrior.” Shiva dispatched Virabhadra and an army of demons to pay Daksha a visit. Happily, Shiva's wife

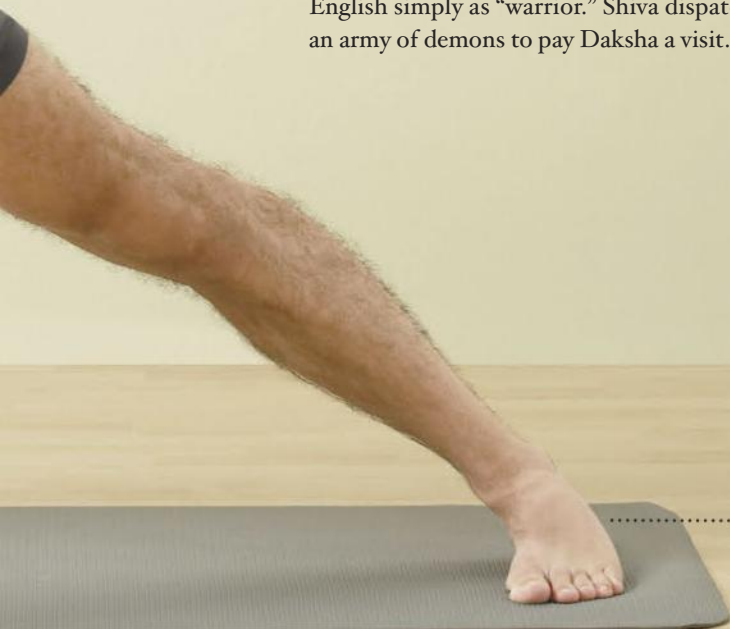


DON'T arch the lower back.



DO aim inner knee toward pinky toe.

standing & balancing



PRESS OUTER FOOT TO FLOOR



gets brought back to life, and Daksha's whupping teaches him humility (he loses his head and winds up with a goat's head as a replacement).

We re-create the image of Virabhadra in three incarnations of Virabhadrasana, designated by Roman numerals (I, II, III), in which we stand like mighty warriors. Our focus will be on II. Virabhadrasana II is an excellent way to stretch your groins and, even though both feet stay on the floor, improve your balance. You can also, to a lesser extent, strengthen your arms and open your chest. Yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar points

out in his book *Light on Yoga* that Virabhadrasana II "tones the abdominals." It's also a nice way to strengthen your legs and make them shapely.

LEGWORK

It's important in Vira II to bring awareness to the front leg's femoral head—the little ball on the end of the bone that plugs into the hip socket and swivels like a joystick. You also need to pay attention to the outer heel of the back foot, just under the outer ankle bone.

To work on proper front-leg alignment, try a simple chair-supported exercise. If

pose benefits

- Strengthens legs and ankles
- Stretches groins
- Opens chest
- Improves balance

contraindications

- Serious knee injury
- Sprained ankle
- Neck problems (look straight ahead, rather than over the hand)
- High blood pressure

you're tall, you might need a blanket; if you're short, grab a block. Set the chair on your sticky mat, near the front edge, with the back of the chair facing the right edge. Face the front edge of your mat and sit on the chair with your knees over your heels, shins perpendicular to the floor. Ideally your thighs will be parallel to the floor. If you are tall and your knees are *higher* than your hips, use a blanket to raise your buttocks until your thighs are parallel to the floor. If your feet don't reach the floor (typical for shorter students), put the block beneath your right foot.

Swing your left leg around the seat, straighten the left knee as much as possible, and step the ball of your left foot onto the floor near the back edge of the mat in a lunge. Rotate your torso away from the chair toward the left, pivot on the ball of your left foot, and press your left heel to the floor so your foot is angled slightly toward the front edge of the mat. Align the middle of the right heel with the middle of the left foot's inner arch and adjust your inner right thigh more or less perpendicular to the front edge of your mat (*figure 1*).

BE A WARRIOR

In Vira II, you take the stance of a strong warrior. You balance your weight between both legs, and your torso rises up evenly

from your hips. On the chair, avoid leaning forward or back. Burrow the base of your right palm into the hip crease between your front thigh and pelvis and push down against the head of your thigh-bone. Push into the crease, not farther down the thigh. Ideally, you'll feel the back of your thigh press firmly against the seat and, in response, your spine effortlessly lengthen upward. Draw your right hip point away from your thigh, lengthen your tailbone down, and shift your shoulders so they line up over your hips. After a minute or so, release your hand yet stay here, sitting heavily on your thigh. Bend your left knee, swing the leg back to where it started, turn the chair 180 degrees, and repeat on the other side.

In the full pose, many beginners depend on their muscles to sustain the position, and quiver uncontrollably after a few seconds. Then things go downhill. Try to recreate your chair-supported experience, so that some of the support is shifted to your bones, and your muscles can release. Then you can sustain the posture almost indefinitely, needing to come out only for meals and to attend yoga class.

Like other split-leg standing poses, Virabhadrasana II is anchored and stabilized by rooting the outer back heel into the ground. Many beginners have tight groins, so bending the front knee buckles the back knee, which pulls the outer back heel off the floor. Think: What would happen to a tree deprived of its roots? *Before* you bend your front knee, “dig” your outer back heel into the floor. As you bend your front (right) knee, have an imaginary friend resist that movement by pulling on a strap on your left groin. Your left leg will move *physically* through space closer to the floor; however, *energetically* it opposes the movement and keeps your outer back heel rooted.

GET HIP

Stand sideways in the middle of your sticky mat, facing a long edge, and step your feet apart. Ideally, your feet are spread wide enough that when you bend the front knee and position it over the heel, the front thigh is parallel to the floor. With your hands on your hips, turn your

war? what is it good for?

One of yoga's primary behavioral injunctions is *ahimsa*, literally “nonviolence.”

Vyasa, an early commentator on the Yoga Sutra, defines *ahimsa* as refraining “from injuring any being, at any time and in any manner” (Yoga Sutra, II.30).

Doesn't it seem odd that such an exceedingly violent character as Virabhadra is celebrated in a yoga posture? What's up with that?

One possible explanation can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Asanas*, published by India's Lonavla Yoga Institute. We know that many asanas are imitations of, and are named after, what the yogis see in the world, whether living—like humans, animals, and plants—or inanimate like the moon or a boat. The encyclopedia includes Pratyahidhasana (“extended to the left”), which mimics the ready stance of an archer: left leg forward, knee bent, right leg back (like a lunge), arms held up as if holding a drawn bow. It looks like a rough-cut version of Warrior II. Could Virabhadrasana II be some modern

yogi's refined version of what started out as the heroic posture of a battling warrior many centuries ago?

If so, what better name for it than that of the archetypal warrior? Although yoga esteems nonviolence, images of war and warriors aren't unusual in its literature. The most obvious example is in the Bhagavad Gita, the glorious “song” (*gita*), or yoga instruction, delivered by the god-incarnate Krishna to the fearsome warrior Arjuna on the eve of a civil war's 18-day bloodbath. This setting and its two main characters suggest that the “warrior” is actually the average yogi—you and me—struggling mightily against the enemy forces of self-ignorance (*avidya*) on the “battlefield” of life. Krishna is our higher Self (*atman*), always present behind the scenes to offer aid and comfort as he leads us to self-realization.

And so the name *Virabhadra* is a subtle acknowledgment and a reminder, embodied in a trio of powerful postures, of our commitment to fight the good fight.

back (left) foot to the right 30 degrees, and your right foot to the right 90 degrees. Align your front heel and your back arch. *Don't* push the left hip back, away from the long edge of your mat.

Many teachers have you square your pelvis toward the wall your chest is facing; I teach the pose slightly differently to create more width and ease in the lower back. As you bend your front knee, roll the back hip forward a fair amount and rotate the front knee out, toward the pinky-toe side. Once the knee is thus aligned, you can take the back hip back a bit, but be sure your front knee doesn't buckle in toward the big-toe side of your foot.

Inhale, consciously grounding your back heel; on an exhalation, bend your front knee over your heel. Aim the inner knee toward the pinky-toe side of the foot to avoid swiveling your knee inward as you bend it. Now sit your right femur head on the imaginary chair. Then lift your right hip point away from your thigh, tuck your tailbone, and position your shoulders over your pelvis. Align the inner right thigh

with the long edge of the mat.

To get your thigh parallel to the floor, hang a sandbag on a yoga strap from your front hip crease (*figure 2*). Want to go further? Inhale and raise your arms out to the sides, palms down. Press into the back heel and reach actively through the back arm, as if your left arm is trying to pull your front knee straight. You can gaze over the front arm, but if you have neck issues, simply look straight forward. Hold for 30 seconds to a minute, inhale and straighten your front knee, release your arms, and turn your feet forward. *Never* come out of this posture by shifting your weight forward onto the front leg. After a few breaths, repeat on the left.

This pose looks like the mighty warrior Virabhadra emerging fearlessly from the earth and should be a big part of your practice. It increases flexibility and builds strength, physical endurance, and willpower—which will serve you well throughout your practice and your life. ♣

Richard Rosen lives and teaches in California.

THE COMPASSIONATE Backbend

BY KATE TREMBLAY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS BROENING

LEARNING TO PRACTICE WITH OUR
LIMITATIONS—INSTEAD OF STRUGGLING
AGAINST THEM—CAN MAKE BACKBENDING
AN EXERCISE IN SELF-ACCEPTANCE.



Salabhasana ▲

A simple, active backbend, Salabhasana (Locust Pose) offers a primary education in backbending dynamics. In it, you can move easily toward and away from your physical limits. (See instruction on page 53.)

Most of us come to yoga seeking sanctuary. We realize how important it is to briefly step away from the demands of life and relax into a spacious quality of mind that allows us to be with ourselves as we are, without judgment. Insulated from the racket of demands and from the need to rush, we become quiet enough to hear the stirrings of our hearts. And in the act of accepting whatever we find there, we replenish our energy and inspiration. Accepting the truth of our selves, our hearts, our muscles, our level of energy in any given moment is the height of compassion, and practiced this way, yoga becomes an exercise in equanimity.

How is it, then, that so many of us quickly abandon these ideals when we practice backbends? If we're not paying close attention, the acceptance and lovingkindness we were working with



in other poses suddenly dissipates. Any practice of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, those attitudes and behaviors that epitomize the spirit of yoga, falls away. We grasp for a deeper opening, greedy for the glory of a perfect pose. We refuse to surrender to our own body's wisdom. If we're not paying close attention, we can become shockingly forceful and disrespectful of ourselves.

With few exceptions, backbends elicit a passionate response. People either pepper their practice with deeper and deeper ones or they skip them whenever possible, dreading the inevitable discomfort. Those who avoid them mostly do so sheepishly, for what does it say about us if we dread backbends? These are poses that open the heart chakra, build courage and stamina, and give us the sort of energy that propels us to reach out toward others. Do we not value those benefits?

Chances are very good that if you are miserable in backbends, it's not that you don't value the benefits; it's more likely that you have never truly experienced them. Maybe you are stiff or tight along the front body or

haven't yet built enough strength in the back muscles. Perhaps you instinctively know that you need to protect a vulnerable heart from openings you are not ready for. If you have yet to find joy in opening the front body, it's time to develop a different approach to your practice.

HONORING RESISTANCE

The discipline of yoga is a purification practice, but not in the sense that we Americans seem so inclined to believe. The goal is purification not for the sake of perfection but for the sake of freedom. If you practice backbends intent upon eradicating aspects of yourself that you see as somehow "not measuring up," such as weak muscles, stiff joints, or protective insulation, you succeed only in beating yourself up. There's no freedom on

that path and, incidentally, no purification either. It's a path that leads only deeper into neuroses.

If the discipline of yoga is to bring greater freedom, you must practice backbends in a way that accepts and accommodates your resistance—even values and honors it—while still letting you receive the intended benefits. The point of this practice is not to become someone else but to become more fully yourself, to achieve not the glorious backbend pictured on a yoga calendar but one that is at once stable and comfortable for your body and glows with an inner experience of joy, exhilaration, and freedom.

You're more likely to choose poses that honor your limits if you keep in mind the point of the practice, which in this case is opening the front of the body. You probably already do this instinctively after long periods of time spent hunched forward, whether over a computer, a patch in the garden, or something else. You know the stretch: arms reaching up and out, chest puffing forward, maybe even accompanied by a yawn or a growl. This informal backbend opens the muscles of the front body that tightened and shortened while you were pitched forward, and it offers the overstretched and fatigued back muscles relief by shortening them, flushing out waste, and bringing in a fresh supply of oxygenated blood. It feels great to open this way, doesn't it?

What makes this most natural of backbends especially pleasurable is that you rarely try to reach beyond your body's natural comfort level. You're not trying to achieve anything in particular, just instinctively going for the relief and exhilaration of the arch. If you can remind yourself that this revitalization is possible with even the simplest of poses, you will gravitate willingly and eagerly toward the practice of backbends.

TAKING ONLY WHAT YOU NEED

But sometimes even that natural impulse to arch backward is accompanied by an unexpected twinge of pain in the lower back. This is the area of the spine that typically bears the greatest strain during backbends, and if you tend to experience compression in the lower back during practice, you may decide that your body just doesn't bend backward with enough ease to garner the benefits of the practice. Fortunately, the breath can be used to create both comfort and control in backward-bending poses. Lifting and arching the chest on an inhalation and drawing the abdomen in to lengthen the lower back on an exhalation intentionally create a shallower and more uniform arch. This action also pulls the apex of the curve up and out of the lower back,

where it tends to settle uncomfortably, and gives it a new home in the chest. Practiced this way, backbends are not only safer but easier to hold. Rather than struggling against the pose, you can relax into it and receive the gift of opening it has to offer.

Using the breath to control the depth and apex of a backbend offers an interesting encounter with *aparigraha*, the attitude that's described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra as the ability to accept only what is appropriate. You make a conscious choice not to take all that you could, not to move into the fullest backward bend that your body can manage, because you see the value in holding back; you value the health and integrity of your body more than the glory of a deeper backbend. You value the primary function of the pose—the opening of it—more than the final shape or the form of the posture.

This kind of restraint is so uncommon in our culture that it can feel quite unnatural. To embrace restraint, you might need to acknowledge how strongly it conflicts with the messages we regularly receive about what it means to be accomplished and successful. Like it or not, the culture we live in has a strong influence on our psyche. If you move into backbends without

THE POINT IS TO ACHIEVE NOT THE GLORIOUS BACKBEND
PICTURED ON A YOGA CALENDAR BUT ONE THAT'S STABLE AND
COMFORTABLE FOR YOUR BODY AND THAT GLOWS WITH AN
INNER EXPERIENCE OF JOY, EXHILARATION, AND FREEDOM.

acknowledging their potential to collide with the values of yogic practice, doing your best can translate into doing your most. Not only can this lead to injury, but it can also sabotage the benefits of the practice altogether. If you want to give backbending your best effort and still remain true to the spirit of yogic practice, you have to remind yourself that success comes with taking only what you need from a pose—only what your body can appropriately use and no more.

LET YOUR BREATH BE YOUR GUIDE

If you pay close attention, the breath will tell you what you need and when you've gone too far. The breath is constant, but at the same time, it's ever changing. It reflects the state of the body and mind in the most honest and direct way. Strain, pain, anxiety, striving, frustration, over-effort—all of these are revealed by the breath, and you can learn to work within your limits if you learn how to interpret the sensation and sound of the breath.

The breath can also be used to connect your intention more

fully with your physical body. In backbending, the connection is absolute. To set the tone for a skillful, compassionate backbending practice, start by giving yourself the space and freedom to observe the movement of the breath separately from the actions of backbending. To do this, lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. Place your right hand on your upper chest and your left hand on your lower abdomen. Rest each elbow on a blanket so your arms can relax. As you inhale, feel the right hand move first as the lungs fill and the rib cage lifts and broadens. Gradually move the breath downward until the diaphragm moves down and the belly expands, lifting the left hand with it. Then exhale in reverse, beginning with a gentle contraction of the abdominal muscles under the left hand and then relaxing and releasing progressively upward until the diaphragm and muscles of the rib cage relax and the right hand settles.

Maintain the gentle contraction of the abdomen initiated during the exhalation throughout subsequent inhalations, first filling the upper lungs and lifting the rib cage. Maintain the lift of the rib cage in subsequent exhalations while reaffirming the contraction of your abdominal muscles. This subtle

work of using the abdomen to stabilize the lower back and pelvis while reaching the chest forward lengthens the spine. Working backbends this way has a similar feel to opening an extension ladder: The base remains grounded, and the front spine becomes progressively longer. If the back of the ladder were becoming shorter, like the muscles of the back, extending the ladder would create a

long and graceful arch. This action becomes the mechanism by which you control how deeply you arch backward and where you locate the apex of your curve. The breath can be a constant reminder of these actions. It can also serve as the ground-setting intention—on the inhalation, you can extend compassionate care to yourself; on the exhalation, you can revel in pure sensation.

The attitude of compassion can start with choosing the poses that are most appropriate for your body. It's very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that simply because a pose exists, everyone should work toward being able to do it. Not every pose is appropriate for every body. If you're in pain while practicing a pose and cannot find adjustments that enable you to be in the pose comfortably, even with the advice and assistance of a trained instructor, then you must accept that the pose is not appropriate for your body at this time.

Most people with a healthy spine and normal flexibility will find variations of Salabhasana (Locust Pose), Utkatasana (Chair Pose), and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) to

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

A restful, passive pose, Bridge Pose teaches us that legs and arms can be powerful allies in the practice of backbending. (Instruction is on page 54.)



be comfortably challenging and invigorating backbends. (If these poses leave you feeling unopened or unchallenged, however, your body is likely ready for deeper work and more challenging poses, and it would be unskillful for you to leave this more challenging work out of your yoga practice. Remember, you're looking for what is appropriate for you individually.)

SALABHASANA

Salabhasana (pictured on page 50) involves an active contraction of the back muscles to open the front body. This feels delicious when the back is strong and the front body is not overly restricted. Remind yourself that the primary purpose of backbends is to release tension along the front of the body, helping you feel more movement of breath and energy in those areas. As an active backbend, Salabhasana also offers the promise of strengthening muscles along the back of the body. In service of these intended benefits, try lifting your body only 50 percent as high as you comfortably can. Use the reserved energy and the mental space created to stay a few breaths longer than you might be able to if you were really pushing yourself. Then use the extra time to observe sensations and to maneuver within the pose.

To come into Salabhasana, lie face-down with your forehead on the floor and your arms alongside your body, palms down. Exhale and lengthen the lower back by drawing the belly gently toward the spine and pressing the pelvis and thighs toward the floor. Hold a subtle tension in the belly as you inhale and lift the chest and head. Exhale and again lengthen the lower back, drawing the belly gently toward the spine. Inhale, expanding the chest forward and at the same time pulling the apex of the arch from the lower back up to just behind your breastbone.

Stay in touch with your level of exertion and any signs of resistance in your lower back. Resistance doesn't necessarily mean you should stop what you're doing, but it is a reminder to slow down and pay attention to what is happening. Lower the chest a bit to slow down and observe. Find space to move within the pose, to work the chest forward on your inhalations and lengthen the back on your exhalations.

Once you've mastered the action, begin to experiment with deepening the backbend, taking care to honor your comfort level. Is there enough ease in your lumbar spine (in the lower back) to offer it a little more arch? Ideally, you want the lumbar spine and the cervical spine (in the neck) to arch without overcompressing and without compromising your ability to open the front of the thoracic spine (in the middle and upper back).

If you've lifted the apex of the curve upward and your lower back feels fine, release a little of the abdominal contraction at the end of your next inhalation, letting the lower back move a little farther forward. Work to keep the apex of the curve drawing upward, and support the lifting heart from underneath by bringing the shoulder blades firmly against the rib cage. Mirror the action of your chest with the base of your skull, extending it upward on an inhalation so the neck comes to its full length. Then look forward and up with the chin still slightly tucked, as if you were arching up and back over a large ball. The entire spine should lengthen and open into a long, graceful bend, with no single part receiving a disproportionate share of the backbend. This is the true glory of the pose. Savor it.

If you want to move more deeply into the pose, add your legs, lifting them and stretching back through the heels. Every time you move, take only 50 percent of what is possible. Know

that as the body opens, you can take another 10 percent—and another, and another. If you are still comfortable and want a bit more chest opening, lift the arms off the floor too. Keep them by your side and turn the palms to face each other, or interlace your fingers behind your back and stretch the knuckles toward the heels. Just be sure to keep some extra wiggle room for observing and responding—the ultimate yogic conversation among body, breath, and mind.

YOU CAN MAKE A CONSCIOUS CHOICE NOT TO TAKE ALL THAT YOU COULD, NOT TO MOVE AS DEEPLY INTO THE POSE AS IS POSSIBLE FOR YOUR BODY, BECAUSE YOU SEE THE VALUE IN HOLDING BACK; YOU VALUE THE HEALTH AND INTEGRITY OF YOUR BODY MORE THAN THE GLORY OF A DEEPER POSE.

Whenever you take all that your body will give, the question of when to come out of the pose never emerges. You come out when your body gasps “uncle.” By contrast, working as you are here, and as the Yoga Sutra advises—balancing *sthira* (steadiness) and *sukha* (ease)—there is room to observe cues that the quality of your effort is beginning to wane and it’s time to rest. Do you have less control over the subtle actions of controlling depth and apex? Is your breath beginning to lose its smooth, easy rhythm? When your resistance to remaining in the pose overpowers the conversation of your body, it is time to come out. Lie down slowly, turning your head to one side and resting your arms alongside the torso, palms rolling up toward the ceiling. Listen to the echoes of the pose reverberating throughout your body. Enjoy the total release of effort and observe the new quality of your energy. After a short rest, push back into Balasana (Child’s Pose).

UTKATASANA

Salabhasana is challenging for those who have a long torso, a stiff front body, and weak back muscles. If this is the case for you, try Utkatasana (Chair Pose) instead. Like Salabhasana, Utkatasana (*at right*) is an active backbend. It can challenge the back muscles to develop strength, but it does so using gravity, which makes it easier for weaker backs to handle.

To come into the pose, stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose), with your feet parallel and hip-width apart. On an inhalation, raise the arms overhead. On an exhalation, bend your knees as if to sit in a chair as you bring your hands to the thighs. To keep

your knees safe, be sure they track directly forward in line with the toes. The closer the thighs come to parallel with the floor, the more challenging the pose—for both your legs and your back. Remind yourself to work at 50 percent so you have plenty of space to make subtle adjustments.

On each inhalation, lift the chest away from the thighs, pulling the apex of the curve upward into the thoracic spine. On each exhalation, gently contract the abdominal muscles, tucking the tailbone under and lengthening the lower back. Stabilize the pose by reaching into the four corners of each foot, most strongly into the inner and outer edges of each heel to encourage length in the lower back.

Start slowly, with your hands on your thighs. If your body calls for more opening and a stronger surge of energy, bring your arms straight out in front of you and parallel to the floor. For an even stronger position, reach the arms overhead. Keep adjusting the depth and apex with each position change. When you are ready to come out of the pose, return to Tadasana, releasing your arms to your sides, and take several breaths.

SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA

Perhaps the kindest of the lot, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (*pictured on page 53*) is a passive arch for the back; it allows the back muscles to completely relax as the front body opens, with the legs and hips taking on most of the work. To come into the pose, lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor hip-width apart. Press into the feet to lengthen the lower back, bringing it into contact with the floor. Continue pressing through the feet as the knees reach away from the shoulders, lifting the buttocks and increasingly more of the back from the floor. Remind yourself that this is a pose in which your back muscles can actually relax while your legs do the work of opening the front body. By keeping the effort at 50 percent, you’ll find space to enjoy the drape of the back from the pelvis down toward the shoulders, relaxing into the force of gravity.

Let the arms remain passive on the floor or, if your chest is flexible enough to permit, bring them under your back, interlacing your fingers and straightening the arms as much as possible. Either way, reach the arms, like the legs, toward the floor to support the arch of the pose. Once you’re situated, settle into a rhythm of breathing in as you extend the chest toward both ceiling and chin, and breathing out as you lengthen the lower back.

Utkatasana

Working with Utkatasana (Chair Pose), you can learn to control how your back bends—and where. It's also a pose that clearly shows how well you're striking a balance between *sthira* (steadiness) and *sukha* (ease).



initially resisted the practice. Your joints open more, you become stronger and more flexible, and your heart opens into greater self-acceptance and compassion for others.

So why not start with those intentions? Why not practice with the aims of increasing your flexibility, deepening your arch, and banishing your fears? Why should you honor and accommodate your resistance instead of directing your practice of backbends toward eliminating the cause of that resistance?

Any effort to eliminate a part of yourself or your experience is a treacherous practice, and where it leads depends on your mental training. Can you acknowledge your resistance without judging it? Are you able to see weak back muscles as simply that and not as somehow connected to your value as a human being? That might seem easy, but what about when you look at something deeper, such as a protective barrier around the heart chakra? Can you observe that with understanding and equanimity? If you seek to eliminate your resistance because you feel it reflects badly on you as a person, your practice will be filled with negativity and self-loathing. That is a practice

of purification for the sake of perfection, and it leads only to deeper entrapment in suffering.

But what if you do have the ability to look at yourself closely, compassionately, and with equanimity? Can you then meet your resistance head-on? Well, here's the interesting thing: A mind trained in equanimity doesn't push unwanted things away or grasp desired things closer. It honors and accommodates, knowing that such treatment is transformational. Ultimately, it is only in letting go of what you wish you could be, in seeking greater freedom to be who you actually are at any given moment, that the process of your becoming unfolds. So, practice enjoying the backbends that your body enjoys without forcing yourself into poses that reflect only what you *wish* your body could enjoy. Let each arch be an exercise in acceptance and equanimity, an active embrace of the sanctuary that yoga can offer, and a simple acknowledgment of a truth that might just change your whole life. ❖

Kate Tremblay is a yoga teacher and massage therapist in Birmingham, Alabama.

Reach strongly through the heels, contracting the hamstrings to pull the sitting bones toward the back knees. As the hamstrings contract, the lower back is pulled long from below.

When you are able to lengthen the lower back by tugging the back of the pelvis down with your hamstrings, the front body becomes more available to lengthen and open. If you struggle with the comfort of your lower back in backbends, however, you may still find the most comfort by continuing to stabilize and lengthen the lumbar spine at least partially through the contraction of your abdominal muscles. When you are ready to come out of the pose, release the arms out from under you and slowly return the spine to the floor, one vertebra at a time. Rest a moment with the knees bent and the feet on the floor. Relax and observe new sensations.

SEEING WITH COMPASSION

When you practice backbends this way—by honoring resistance and working with integrity and sensitivity—the result is not only more access to the benefits of backbends but also an inevitable transformation of the elements within you that

Fab Abs

Strengthen your
core and improve
your posture.

THOUGH IT SOUNDS impressive in Sanskrit, *Urdhva Prasarita Padasana* rendered in English becomes the decidedly clunky “Raised Stretched-Out Foot Pose.” The name is much ado about a fairly simple exercise that has deep benefits—but most teachers save the syllables and just call it by its initials. UPP involves nothing more than lying on your back and swinging your extended legs through a slightly less than 90-degree arc, from perpendicular to the floor to nearly—but not quite—parallel, and back again. And again.

In *Light on Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar says that UPP is “wonderful for reducing fat round the abdomen, strengthens the lumbar region of the back, and tones the abdominal organs.” What’s not to like about that?

continued on page 58

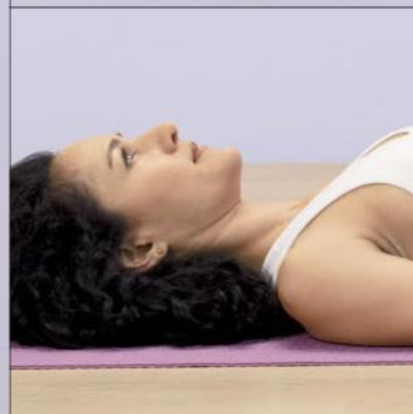
PRESS THROUGH
HEELS

SOFTEN FACE AND THROAT

SOFTEN BELLY



DON'T arch lower back.



DO release shoulder blades away from ears.



The pose has a well-deserved reputation as an abdominal strengthener, but we aren't talking about the rectus abdominis, the long, flat muscle that shores up the belly between the pubis and ribs, which bodybuilder types, like former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, transform into flashy six-pack abs. This simple movement strengthens a deeper muscle that passes through the very core of your body and aids your posture, your movement, and even (because this muscle is in close proximity to the back of the diaphragm) the way you breathe. It's the psoas, which Ida Rolf, the originator of Structural Integration (popularly known as Rolfing), deemed "one of the most significant muscles of the body."

In truth, you have two of them, one on each side of the body (but for simplicity's sake, we'll refer to the muscle in the singular). The psoas lies just behind the abdominal organs and is more difficult to access than the rectus abdominis. It takes a circuitous route through the core of the body, attaching on the front of the lumbar spine (lower back), then runs along the inner surface of the pelvis and over the pubis to attach to the inner surface of the thighbone (femur) at a bony knob called the lesser trochanter. Rolf says that the

psoas, outwardly a powerful hip flexor, plays an important role in general body structure, in posture and movement, and even in digestion and elimination.

PUPPET PRACTICE

The root of UPP's movement is deep inside the torso where the psoas attaches to the lumbar spine. I find it useful to imagine that the psoas is a puppet string, originating on my inner thigh (the lesser trochanter). The puppeteer (what good are puppet strings without a puppeteer?) is sitting on my lumbar spine and holding the other end. She can pull on or release it, depending on whether she's raising or lowering my leg.

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor with your heels about a foot from your buttocks. Focus on the right lesser trochanter. From here, in your imagination, follow the course of the puppet-string psoas through the pelvis and up to the lumbar spine, where your puppeteer is holding its free end.

As she pulls on the string, exhale and watch your right foot lift effortlessly off the floor and your right thigh close in toward your belly. (For now, keep your knee bent.) Pause when the hip is fully flexed, and inhale. As the puppeteer

releases the string, exhale and lightly float your foot back toward the floor.

But wait! Just as your tippy-toes brush the floor, pause for a deep inhalation. On the exhalation, the puppeteer will pull again, and your foot will rise up. Continue this up-and-down swinging for at least a minute. Pause at the conclusion of each movement to inhale; lift or drop your foot only on an exhalation. When finished, return your right foot to the floor and repeat with your left leg.

When each leg has worked solo, try the exercise with your legs together. Be prepared for a bit more challenge, especially if your psoas pair is weak or unbalanced, as it likely is. You can expect two things to happen as you swing your legs: One, you'll unconsciously assist the psoas by tightening your rectus abdominis; and two, your low back will arch away from the floor. Neither action is desirable. Tightening the abdominal muscle interferes with breathing, overworks your six pack, and also prevents the psoas from assuming its proper role in hip flexion. Arching is an invitation to an oh-my-aching-back injury. What to do?

Still lying supine on the floor, rest your fingertips on your lower belly (below your navel) and have your puppeteer lift your

2

pose benefits

Strengthens low-back
and psoas muscles

Tones abdominal muscles

Improves posture

contraindications

Low-back
and hip injuries



backbends & abdominals

feet off the floor. Set your knees over your hip joints (so your thighs are perpendicular to the floor and your heels hang down by your buttocks) and hold this position for a minute or so. Your belly should be firm (neither rock hard nor squishy) and relatively flat (not mounded up), your lumbar spine in its natural, gentle arch.

Slowly lower and raise your bent legs. Your puppeteer may pull with more effort than before. As she goes about her business, mind your lower belly and back. Keep the surface of your belly relatively soft and maintain the natural arch in your lower back. Try not to disturb them with your leg movements. If you feel strain in your low back, protect it by swinging your legs only a few inches through the arc. Continue for a minute or so; then, on an exhalation, release your feet to the floor and rest for a minute.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Now try the full pose, with both legs. You can practice UPP with or without support. If the previous exercise was difficult, use the support of a wall (*figure 1*). Lie on your back with your buttocks about 12 to 18 inches from the wall. Exhale, lift your feet, and bring your knees over your hips. Inhale and straighten your knees so your

legs are perpendicular to the floor. Separate your feet about 12 inches, inwardly rotate your thighs (so that your big toes are closer to each other than your heels), press through the backs of your heels, then squeeze your legs together. Exhale and lower your legs until your heels touch the wall. Inhale; exhale as you bring your legs back to perpendicular.

Take a moment to assess how close to the wall you need to be. Edge back until you find a spot that feels like a challenge but not a strain. Measure your preferred distance from the wall so you know where to plunk yourself down the next time you practice UPP. Four to six repetitions is a reasonable start, and 12 to 15 repetitions a worthwhile goal. Over time, gradually back away from the wall until that wonderful day when you can go into the pose without any support.

The second approach to UPP is to do it unsupported, which I suspect a lot of enthusiastic male readers will attempt even though they shouldn't. Lower your legs either until your abdominals and back start to howl, at which point you should immediately swing your legs back to vertical (bend your knees if needed); or until your heels are 3 or 4 inches from the floor, at which point you should exhale

smoothly and bring your legs back to vertical. Maintain the inner rotation of your thighs and the active push through the backs of your heels.

Gradually build toward a dozen or more repetitions. You're ready to increase the number when your jaw, tongue, eyes, and the back of your neck are relaxed in the pose. When you can swing your legs through a full arc smoothly without locking or gripping the psoas, or holding your breath, you can add more repetitions.

It's easier to do this exercise if you press your palms and arms down against the floor alongside your torso for stability (*as shown on page 56*). For a greater challenge, you can reach your arms overhead along the floor, with your palms facing up. You can also weigh your hands and wrists down with a sandbag (*figure 2*).

UPP is great for strengthening the psoas, improving posture, and firming belly bulges. It also teaches you to "root" your legs energetically. When your movements are initiated from the spine, you'll feel more stable. And you'll find that UPP is great preparation as you take on more exciting yoga challenges. ❖

Contributing editor Richard Rosen lives and teaches yoga in Northern California.



KEEP THROAT SOFT

LIFT STERNUM

STRETCH ARMS AND
HANDS FORWARD

PULL SHOULDERS
BACK AND DOWN

MOVE BACK RIBS
FORWARD

FIRM AND
TIGHTEN KNEES

Chart Your Depths

Let Paripurna Navasana (a.k.a. Full Boat Pose) take you on a journey to your innermost core, where you'll find a sea of calm.

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD that Paripurna Navasana (Full Boat Pose) builds core strength. But in yoga, the “core” refers to more than just abs. B. K. S. Iyengar says that practice leads you on an inward journey from the periphery of your body to the core of your being. With Navasana, you'll build

strong abdominal muscles that can help support your lower back.

The process of coordinating the work of your limbs and your torso while strengthening your spine will also teach you about your breath, your attention span, your emotions, and your very nature. Eventually, even a simple



DON'T let your back round and chest collapse.



DO bring your legs close to your torso, and lift your back and chest.



1 Bent knees support bringing the thighs and torso together with a long spine.

pose like Navasana can penetrate beyond the muscles, nerves, bones, and organs to your Self—your innermost core.

Navasana is a compact pose that requires you to draw everything into your center: The abdomen moves toward the spine, and the spine moves forward to support the front of the trunk. The shoulder blades move down and in toward the chest, the chest spreads, and both the arms and the legs stay firm. It's a lot to pay attention to, but the integration of all your body parts in Full Boat Pose will leave you feeling strong and supple as well as mentally and emotionally steady.

If your mind begins to wander, the inner firmness you've cultivated will start to waver, and you'll lose your balance. So, to find your inner core and stability in the pose—and maintain your focus—keep your face soft and your breath relaxed. The idea is that when your brain is tense and your eyes bulge, your focus becomes more external. When you're mentally relaxed and your facial features recede, however, your attention draws inward, and you can easily find stability again.

Although Navasana will work your core muscles, it's no gym crunch. Instead of bringing your chest and pelvis close together and shortening the front body, you'll pull your ribs away from the



abdomen to lift the chest—all while balancing on your buttocks. Practice this pose often, and you'll discover how to engage and stretch the abdomen simultaneously. Lengthening the front body like this is an essential action for many asana and pranayama techniques. It supports the entire chest cavity (as opposed to a tight, short front body, which puts pressure on the lungs, internal organs, and

lower back), and it can facilitate smooth and efficient breathing as you do your asana practice or go about your day.

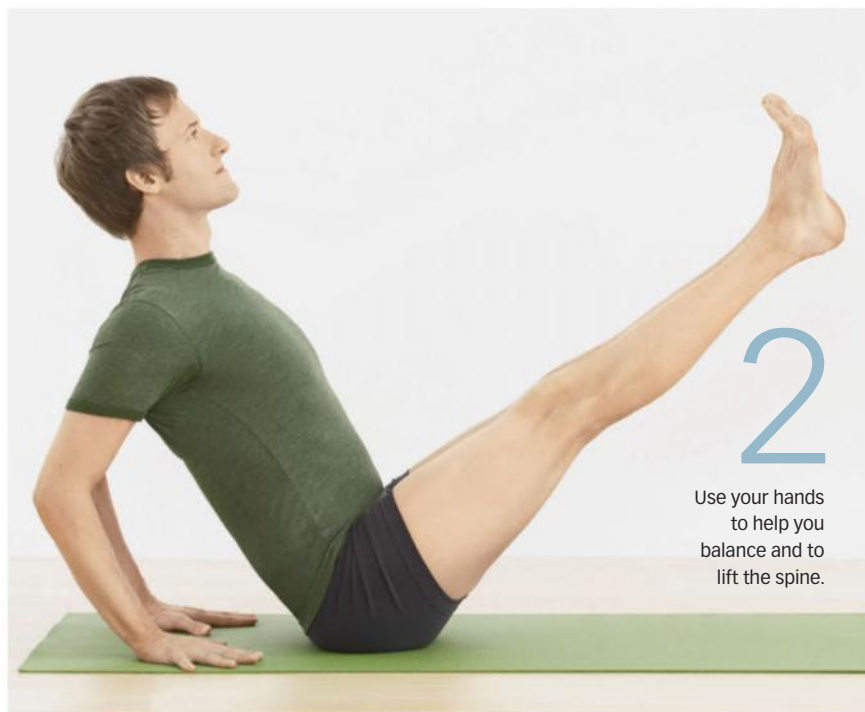
HALF-MAST

Full Boat Pose is like a balancing version of Dandasana (Staff Pose), so if you cannot sit up straight in Dandasana because of tight hamstrings, you may find it difficult to bring your legs toward your torso without rounding your back and sinking into your chest.

Bending your knees in the first variation (*figure 1*) will take your hamstrings out of the equation, enabling you to practice the pose without sagging in the spine. If your abdomen, back, or legs are not yet strong enough to manage the dynamics of the full pose, the second variation (*figure 2*) will show you how to lift your spine while straightening your legs. Both variations give you the opportunity to learn the pose gradually so that you can experience the dynamics of the back, legs, and abdomen working together to bring you into your core.

To do Navasana with bent knees, begin by sitting in Dandasana, and then place your palms on the floor beside your hips. Press your thighs down and stretch your heels away from your pelvis to fully straighten your legs. Lift your torso away from the floor and open your chest. Your back should feel as though it's moving forward, toward the front of your body. Now lift the front of your body all the way from the bottom of your pelvis to the top of your chest. To create some space between your torso and legs, press the very tops of your thighbones into the floor and lift the bottom of your abdomen up away from your thighs without leaning on the back of your buttocks. Lift your rib cage away from your abdomen and roll your shoulders back.

Next, bend your knees and place your feet on the floor. Hold the tops of your knees with your hands and pull on them slightly to lift your sternum. Raise your feet until your shins are parallel to the floor, and then flex your feet. With your legs touching and your knees still bent, bring your thighs closer to your chest and lift your chest.



BALANCED TO THE CORE

Now that you are balancing on your buttocks, see that you're not rounding your back. Move your spine forward, toward your front body. Pull on your bent knees once again to lift your chest and increase the distance between your sternum and your navel. Without dropping your chest, stretch your arms out in front alongside your shins; keep them parallel to the floor, with the palms facing each other. Notice how your abdominal muscles engage as you pull your thighs closer to your torso. Don't let your back round, but see if you can lengthen the front of your torso more.

Even as you stretch your arms forward, pull your shoulders back and move your shoulder blades down and in toward your chest. Although simultaneously engaging and lengthening your abdomen is challenging, these actions bring your attention toward the source of your movements and help keep you focused. Breathe normally, relax your throat, and look straight ahead. You can hold the pose for 30 seconds, and then work up to one minute. When you're ready, exhale and place your feet on the floor to return to Dandasana.

ANCHORED AND STEADY

In the second variation, you'll balance in Navasana with straight legs while keeping

your hands on the floor behind you to help you feel steady and to support the lift of your spine.

Begin in Dandasana. Lean back slightly and place your palms a few inches behind your hips. Lift your chest, bend your knees, and raise your legs until your shins are parallel to the floor. Bring your thighs toward your torso, and move your back ribs and shoulder blades forward. Exhale and straighten your legs without rounding your back. Extend from your calves to your heels until your toes are about as high as your head. You'll feel your abdomen working, but don't let the front of your body shorten. Instead, lift your navel toward your chest and your ribs off your abdomen. Roll your shoulders back and gaze straight ahead.

It doesn't take long in this pose to realize that your legs have to work very hard to remain straight and uplifted. So, just as you do in Dandasana, find support by pressing your thighs to the back of your legs and extend your calves toward your heels. Reach out through your inner heels and broaden the soles of your feet. Use your hands to help balance yourself without tilting back. Breathe smoothly and keep your face and throat relaxed. Let the effort to become tall and balanced be supported by your inner body without

outward strain so that your mind remains quiet. Then exhale, bend your knees, and place your feet back on the floor.

FULL SAIL

Now you're prepped and ready to practice Full Boat Pose. If you find that your back or legs won't let you hold yourself up without sinking in the spine, you can support your heels on a wall or tall chair.

Start in Dandasana and again lean back on your hands. Lift and straighten your legs as you did in the second variation. Now come onto your fingertips and lift your lower back so that your entire spine feels as though it is moving toward the front of your body. Lift your arms and stretch them evenly out in front of you, parallel to the floor. Keep your palms extended, facing each other. Stretch your fingers forward and pull your shoulders back and down as you lift your sternum.

Keep your knees firm and tight to help maintain straight legs. Extend the inner legs toward your inner heels, and spread the balls of your feet from your big toe toward your little toe. Without bending your knees, work toward lifting your legs higher so that your feet rise above the level of your head.

Lift your chest while keeping your chin level and your throat soft. Look straight ahead, perhaps at your feet, as you hold the pose for 30 to 60 seconds. Then exhale and release your legs to the floor. Lie down on your back with your knees bent to rest. Allow your abdomen to release toward the back of your body and your back to press into the floor.

Holding yourself up and lengthening your arms, legs, abdomen, and chest in Paripurna Navasana draws your focus inward. Despite the effort involved, connecting to the stability of your core can be calming and centering to your body, mind, and emotions. Contact with this center of your being is like finding silence in the midst of a storm. Despite the many actions involved in this pose, the result of those actions can draw you closer to your own source of calm stillness. ✿

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strike a ROYAL pose

**a beginner's
guide to
yoga's key
inversions**

by AADIL PALKHIVALA

photography by JOHN ROBBINS

Salamba Sirsasana
(Supported Headstand)
KING OF ASANAS

When I announced to the class during a workshop I was teaching a few years ago that it was time for Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand), an elderly woman slunk out of the room, quickly followed by her yoga teacher. Moments later they came back. Later, I learned that the student had left because she'd never been upside down in her life and was scared to try; her yoga teacher had gently persuaded her to return, telling her that this was the perfect opportunity. Hesitantly, the student had agreed.

I helped her up, kept her there for about 15 seconds, and carefully brought her down. She stood up, smiled, and gave me a big hug. The next day the first thing she said to me was, "Can you take me upside down again today?" I've been told that she has happily practiced inversions during every class since. At a spry 82, this woman had faced her fears, empowered herself, and made herself more able in old age than she had been in youth.

Since we rarely, if ever, purposefully turn ourselves upside down, an aversion to inversions is natural. But it's a shame to let fear keep us from so many benefits and delights. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "He has not learned the lessons of life who does not every day surmount a fear." What better time to discard an old fear than today?

ROLE REVERSAL

Because of their myriad benefits, Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand, pronounced *shir-SHA-sa-nub*) and Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand, pronounced *sar-vaan-GAH-sa-nub*) are considered the king and queen of asanas, respectively. Sirsasana develops our capacity for action (fire element) and enhances our ability to create (air element). Sarvangasana nurtures our capacity to *stop* doing and get grounded (earth element) and fosters our ability to be still and reflective (water element). Sirsasana makes us more alert and focused; Sarvangasana makes us calm and receptive.

Inversions set yoga apart from other physical disciplines: Psychologically, they let us see things from an alternative

Salamba Sarvangasana
(Supported Shoulderstand)
QUEEN OF ASANAS



Shoulderstand tips

THE LIFT of the spine is paramount; if the spine drops sharply or presses into the floor, it puts excessive pressure on the vertebrae, causing various problems in the cervical and thoracic vertebrae.

RELAX the throat and neck.

USE YOUR HANDS to lift your back toward the ceiling; try walking them down toward your armpits.

KEEP YOUR upper arms parallel, with your elbows about shoulder-width apart.

YOUR SACRUM should feel as if it is moving upward.

NEVER TURN YOUR HEAD while in this pose, and don't lift your chin or pull it in; these actions put tremendous strain on the neck. If you need to adjust your head or neck, come out of the pose, make the adjustment, and then go back into the pose.

perspective. Emotionally, they guide the energy of the pelvis (seat of creation and personal power) toward the heart center, enabling self-exploration and inner growth. Physically, they stimulate the immune and endocrine systems, thereby invigorating and nourishing the brain and the organs. Done correctly, they also release tension in the neck and the spine.

I practice both poses every day and recommend that most of my students do the same. However, I do suggest that women forgo inversions during their menstrual period; reversing blood flow goes against the body's natural urge to release stale blood and the endometrial lining, and it may lead to a backflow of menstrual fluid. Other contraindications include neck injuries, high blood pressure, heart conditions, epilepsy, and eye problems.

To receive the palpable benefits of these poses—and to prevent injury, especially to the neck—it's essential to learn the correct setup and alignment for each pose. Be mindful about your body as you approach these inversions, but do give them a try. Take the time to master them, and you will reap their benefits for the rest of your life.

SHOULDERSTAND BASICS

A healthy Sarvangasana requires a strong opening of the armpits and a rolling of the shoulders back and toward each other to allow the neck to release properly. A good way to prepare for this is to stand with your back near a table, interlock your fingers, place your hands on the table, and bend your knees while lifting your chest (*figure 1, right*). This replicates the movement necessary in the full pose but places no weight on the head or neck, allowing you to cultivate flexibility without risk.

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose; *figure 2, right*) is another good prep-

aration, because it distributes weight between the feet and upper body while protecting the neck. In this pose, you can check to see if you've developed the necessary flexibility in your shoulders for Sarvangasana. Lift your pelvis, leave your shoulders on the floor, and notice your seventh cervical vertebra (C7), that big bump at the bottom of your neck. If it's pressing into the floor, you will need to use a stack of firm blankets or foam pads to support your body. If you use blankets or pads, they should support your body from your elbows to your shoulders and upper trapezius muscles, which cover the upper-back part of the neck and shoulders. If you have stiff trapezius muscles, C7 will also rest on the pads. Eventually, your chest will touch your chin, indicating that your neck is mobile enough for you to practice Sarvangasana.

If you feel you are ready to move on, try practicing Ardha Sarvangasana (Half Shoulderstand; *figure 3, right*). This is done with the pelvis lifted off the floor, the feet on the wall, and the shoulders rolled under with two or three carefully folded blankets or firm pads under them to ensure that the neck is pain free. The pads should be in the same position as described above for Setu Bandha Sarvangasana. In time, you

will feel ready to do full Sarvangasana (*figure 4, right*) by lifting one leg at a time from Ardha Sarvangasana.

While pads are unnecessary for limber bodies, for the rest of us they are necessary. Ultimately, the shoulders themselves become the pads, and no part of the spine touches the floor. In the meantime, the stiffer the shoulders, the higher the pads need to be. Though many instructors teach this pose without pads, I value my students' necks and consider pads to be an indispensable part of the posture.

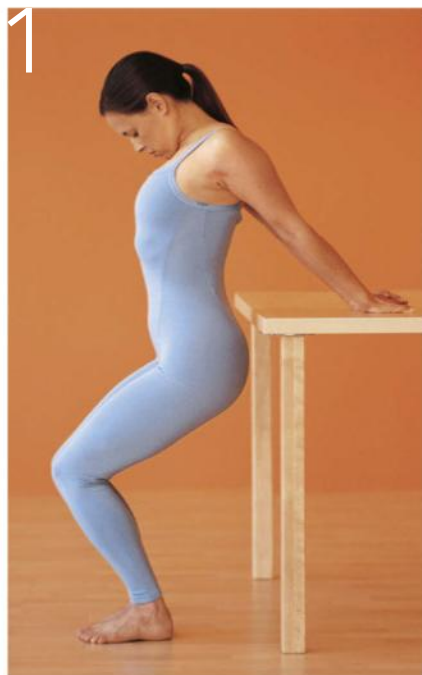
After you come out of Sarvangasana, sit up and notice its effects. Your eyelids should feel heavy and your facial muscles soft and weighted, as if your jawbone is going to drop off. If you feel agitated, angry, or tense, you may have stayed in the pose too long or may need to work with a teacher to refine your alignment.

LEARNING HEADSTAND

The gifts of Sirsasana are so great that even if you are not ready to do the actual pose, you can benefit by preparing for it. The preparations help you strengthen the latissimus dorsi muscles—the large muscles that attach the upper arms to the back—as well as help create the awareness required to spread, lift, and strengthen the muscles around the shoulder blades so that the neck is protected.

To start, you take Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose; *figure 1, page 69*) and focus on engaging the muscles that spread the shoulder blades away from each other, away from the floor, and toward the rib cage. This action builds the upper-body strength you will need, and when you re-create this in Sirsasana, both your head and neck will be protected. In Adho Mukha Svanasana, make sure that your shoulder blades are wide and your neck is long.

4 Steps to Shoulderstand

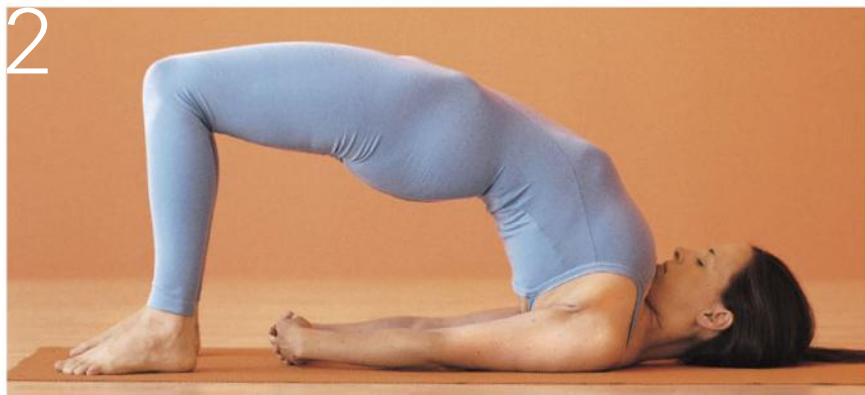


1 Shoulder Opener

Stand with your back facing a table. Interlock your fingers and rest your palms on the tabletop. While exhaling, drop your buttocks, bend your knees as much as possible, and move your armpits and the sides of your chest forward and up. Press your shoulder blades down and apart, rolling the tops of your shoulders toward each other. Hold for 9 breaths.

2 Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)

Lie face-up on a sticky mat. Bend your knees and place your feet hip-width apart. On an inhalation, lift your pelvis 8 to 12 inches off the floor. Straighten your arms, interlocking your fingers and thumbs underneath you, palms facing each other. Lift and roll your shoulders under your body one at a time, until your seventh cervical vertebra (C7) is off the floor. Relax your throat as you move your chest toward your chin. Now lift the pelvis to your maximum. Hold for 9 to 18 breaths.



3 Ardha Sarvangasana (Half Shoulderstand)

Wrap three folded blankets or pads in a sticky mat and place them against a wall. Lie on your back, bend your knees, and place your feet on the wall, knees slightly bent. Lift your pelvis off the floor and roll your shoulders under, as in Bridge Pose. Place your hands on your back and walk them toward your shoulders, keeping your elbows and knees hip-width apart and your shinbones level. Drop your body weight into your elbows and look toward your heart center. Hold for 18 to 36 breaths.



4 Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand)

From the figure 3 position, slowly straighten one leg at a time, taking weight onto your shoulders without tensing your neck. If your buttocks drop toward the wall, you are not yet ready to straighten your legs. (If that's the case, place your feet back on the wall.) Drop your lower belly into your upper belly as you lift and relax your buttocks. Walk your hands down your back toward the floor, keeping your elbows shoulder-width apart. Hold for 18 to 36 breaths.

Headstand tips

KEEP YOUR elbows shoulder-width apart. Most people spread their elbows too wide, which forces the shoulder blades toward each other and cramps the upper back and the neck.

YOUR SHOULDER BLADES should be constantly lifting and spreading so that the bones of your neck drop toward your throat.

MAKE SURE your wrists do not lift off the floor.

ASSUMING THAT your neck is healthy, you should be balanced on the fontanel or slightly in front of it, not on the crown of your head.

IF YOU FEEL like you are going to fall, remember that the less tense you are as you go down, the less likely you are to hurt yourself. I always tell my students to pretend they have no bones as they go down!

(You can allow your head to rest on a block as you do this work.) Check to see if your shoulders are below an imaginary line drawn between your wrists and your buttocks; if so, you are ready to go on.

Learning how to set up your arms and head is the next step toward Sirsasana. Interlock your fingers and thumbs on the floor in front of you. Keep your wrists as far apart as possible and your elbows shoulder-width apart, so that your inner elbows and inner armpits form a square. Place your head against your wrists and thumb mounds; your head should rest on the floor at your fontanel (the spot in front of the crown of the head) or slightly in front of it. You can find the fontanel by feeling for the big bump on the top of your head and then sliding your fingers forward; you will feel a valley (the fontanel) followed by a second bump.

If you have stiff shoulders and a rounded upper back, try a Sirsasana preparation (*figure 2, right*) with firm pads against a wall. This helps to flatten and open your upper back, create a soft neck, and encourage the sense of lift in your shoulders that is necessary for doing Sirsasana correctly. Set up your head and arms with your knuckles touching the wall, then walk your feet toward your arms and straighten your legs. Press your wrists down and try to take your shoulders off the pads; as you do so, you should feel your head lifting off the floor.

As a beginning yoga student, you should have 90 percent of your weight on your forearms and 10 percent on your head. Many beginners find that Sirsasana is no longer scary when they realize there is very little weight resting on their head and neck. As you evolve in the posture, you'll put more and more weight on your head until eventually nearly 100 percent of your weight is on your head.

The next step is Ardha Sirsasana (Half Headstand; *figure 3, right*). There are no balance issues in this preparatory pose, because the arms are on the floor and the feet are pressing against the wall with the legs parallel to the floor. Kneel with your back to a wall, and place your arms on a sticky mat set a leg's length from the wall. Interlock your fingers and thumbs, place your elbows shoulder-width apart, bring your fontanel to the floor, and make sure your head is not tipped or twisted to one side. Lift your shoulders, moving your shoulder blades up and apart like water flowing from a fountain. Then slowly walk your feet up the wall until your thighs and legs are parallel to the floor. Hold the pose for about 30 seconds; come down. If you were able to feel your shoulder blades move up and away from each other in the pose, you are ready for Sirsasana.

To move into the full pose (*figure 4, right*), set your sticky mat next to a wall and place your knuckles next to the wall, following the same setup instructions for the head and shoulders. To come up, bend your legs and gently jump both legs up and land with the soles of your feet touching the wall (*figure 4, inset*). Straighten your legs one at a time, pressing them together.

When you come out of Sirsasana and sit up, you should feel a peaceful, focused sensation in your brain and nerves. Your hands should be calm and steady. If they are not, you have stayed too long, worked incorrectly, or worked too hard. Ask a teacher to check your pose to see that your head and neck are in the correct alignment and that your shoulders are lifting and widening properly.

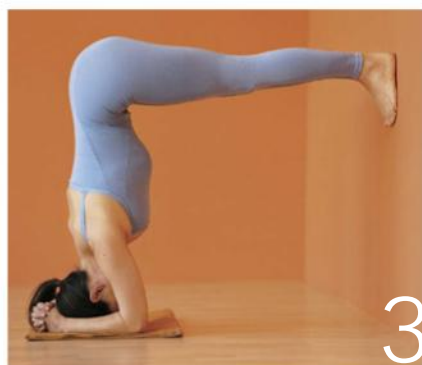
INVERSIONS IN PRACTICE

Now that you know how to do the royal poses, how do you fit them into your practice sequence? Because it cools the body, Shoulderstand should be done after Headstand, which warms the body. In Sarvangasana, the back of the neck is released and the vertebrae are extended, releasing any tension and compression in the neck that an incorrect Sirsasana may have caused. In a well-rounded practice session, Sirsasana should come after standing poses and before other intense work such as deep backbends and twists. Sarvangasana comes at the end, before Savasana (Corpse Pose). How long should you hold the poses? The rule of thumb is to hold Sarvangasana twice as long as Sirsasana, yet not to strain. Work with a teacher to find what's right for you.

I hope these words have encouraged you to begin a lifelong practice of these magnificent poses in a way that is both safe and beneficial. In doing these two inversions, the king and queen of asanas, you will be experiencing the best of yoga. May your work help you discover the fragrant sweetness that is, after all, your own inner essence. ❖

Aadil Palkhivala is the founder and director of Alive and Shine Center in Bellevue, Washington. For more information about his teaching, visit aliveandshinecenter.com.

4 Steps to Headstand



1 Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

Sit on your shins and bend forward, resting your chest on your thighs. Stretch your arms out in front of your body. Tuck your toes under, lift your hips, and straighten your legs while pressing your hands into the floor. Press the mounds of your index fingers into the floor and spread your shoulder blades away from each other. Glide your shoulder blades toward your buttocks by dropping your rib cage toward the floor while pressing your shoulder blades into your upper back. Press your upper back toward your feet, creating a downward arch between hands and pelvis. Place your forehead on a block. Activate all three movements of your shoulder blades—spread them apart, glide them toward your buttocks, and move them into your rib cage. Hold for 9 breaths.

2 Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand), variation

With your knuckles against a wall, set up the pose by interlocking your fingers and thumbs, keeping your wrists as far apart as possible and your elbows shoulder-width



apart, so that your inner elbows and inner armpits form a square. Place your head against your wrists and thumb mounds; your head should rest on the floor at your fontanel or slightly in front of it. Have a helper place two long, firm pads between your back and the wall. Bend your knees, walk your feet in as close as possible, and straighten your legs. Relax your neck and press your wrists and forearms into the floor. Hold for 9 breaths.

3 Ardha Sirsasana (Half Headstand)

Place a folded mat near a wall, about a leg's length from it. Facing away from the wall, kneel and place your arms and head on the mat in Sirsasana position. Walk your feet up the wall until your legs are parallel to the floor. Press your wrists and forearms into the floor and open your shoulders, just as in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Squeeze your legs together and lift your sitting bones and the sides of your waist toward the ceiling. Hold for 9 breaths.

4 Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand)

Place your arms and head in Sirsasana position on a folded sticky mat, your knuckles touching the wall. Press your forearms and wrists into the floor while moving your shoulder blades toward your buttocks. Walk your feet slowly to the wall, then bend your knees and gently jump your legs up, placing your feet on the wall with your knees bent. Straighten your legs one at a time. Squeeze your inner legs together and lift your heels toward the ceiling. Hold for 9 to 18 breaths.

Get Hip

Learn proper alignment in Pigeon Pose and enjoy a safe and sweet hip opener.

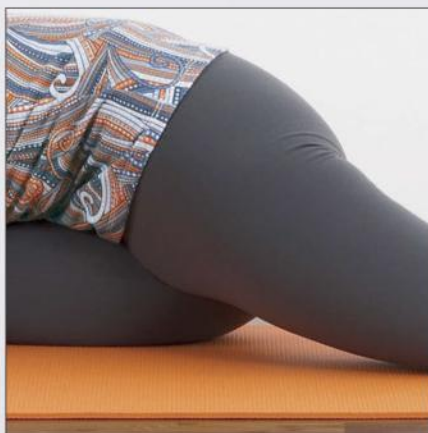
YOGA HANDLES STIFF HIPs in a variety of ways, but most directly through a family of poses that are known loosely as “hip openers.” Some hip openers increase the external, or outward, rotation of the femur bone in the hip socket. Others lengthen the psoas muscle, a primary hip flexor connecting the torso with the legs that gets chronically shortened in our chair-bound society. Pigeon Pose is an extremely effective hip opener that addresses both areas, with the front leg working in external rotation and the back leg in position to stretch the psoas.

Pigeon is actually a variation of the advanced pose Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose). The two poses share a similar alignment in the hips and, more importantly, an imperative to be approached thoughtfully and consciously. Most practitioners recognize that One-Legged King Pigeon is an advanced backbend that requires precise alignment. Yet many of us are likely to thought-



RELEASE FOREHEAD
TO THE FLOOR

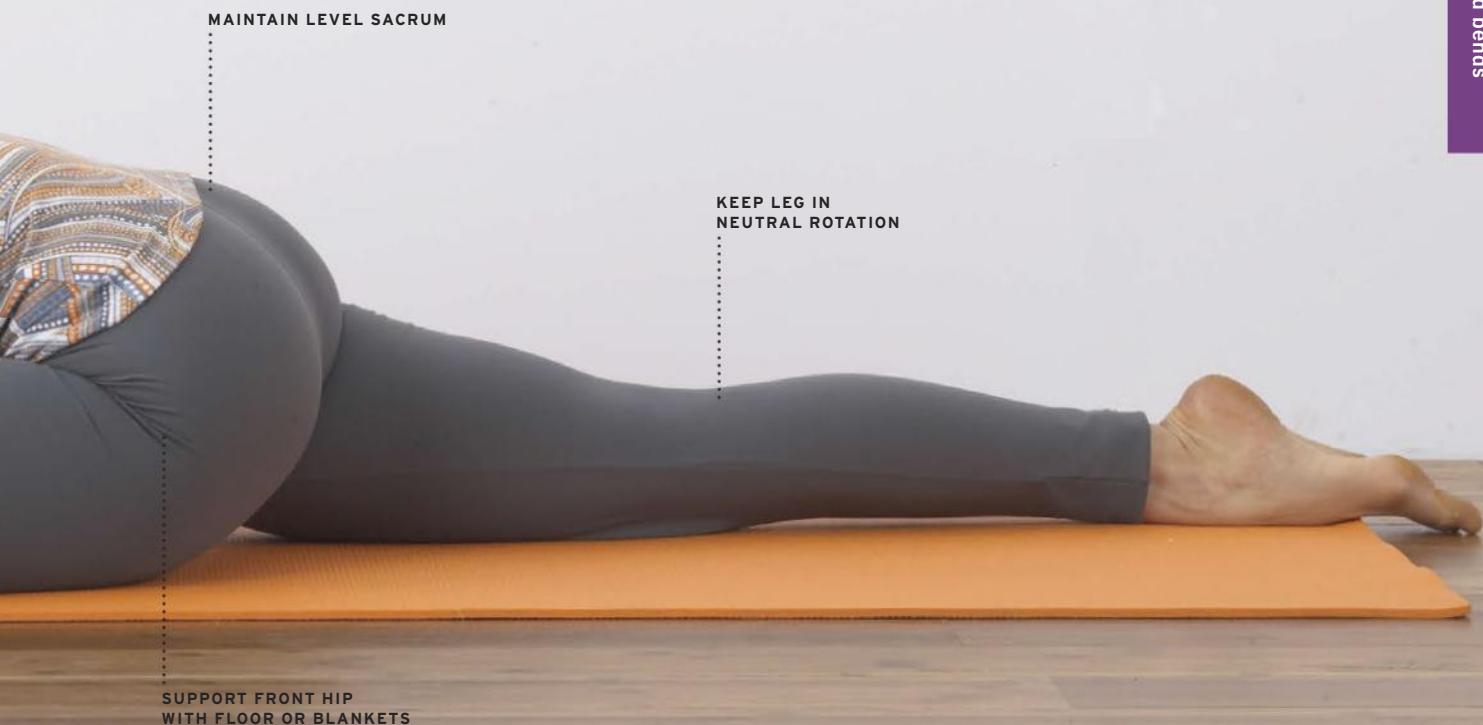
ADJUST FRONT SHIN
TOWARD FRONT OF MAT



DON'T fall off to one side.



DO have your hips even and level.



MAINTAIN LEVEL SACRUM

KEEP LEG IN
NEUTRAL ROTATION

SUPPORT FRONT HIP
WITH FLOOR OR BLANKETS

forward bends



lessly fold into the forward-bend variation of Pigeon, which can stress the knee and sacrum. To avoid injury, I approach Pigeon by first doing variations that will open the hips gradually and safely. Once your hips are open, you'll be able to craft a well-balanced Pigeon that benefits your hips and lower back. If you practice it consistently, you'll notice more ease in your lower half as you sit, stand, and walk.

THREAD THE NEEDLE

One of the best ways to open the hips and prepare for Pigeon is through a supine modification called Eye of the Needle (sometimes called Dead Pigeon, *figure 1*). I teach this pose to first-timers and practice it myself on a regular basis. As you move through this and the next variation, and then toward the final pose, make sure that you alternate sides so that your body can unfold evenly and progressively.

To begin, come onto your back with your knees bent and your thighs parallel and hip-distance apart. Next, cross your left ankle over your right thigh, making sure that your anklebone clears your thigh. Actively flex your front foot by pulling your toes back. When you do this, the center of your foot will line up with your kneecap rather than curving into a sickle shape, which can stress the ligaments of the ankle and the knee.

Maintaining this alignment, pull your right knee in toward your chest, thread your left arm through the triangle between your legs, and clasp your hands around the back of your right leg. If you can hold in the front of your shin without lifting your



pose benefits

Increases external range of motion of femur in hip socket

Lengthens hip flexors

Prepares body for backbends

Prepares body for seated postures like Padmasana (Lotus Pose)

contraindications

Knee injury

Sacroiliac issues

shoulders off the floor or rounding the upper back, do so; otherwise, keep your hands clasped around your hamstring or use a strap. The goal is to avoid creating tension in the neck and shoulders as you open the hips, so choose a position that keeps your upper body relaxed. As you draw your right leg in toward you (making sure to aim it toward your right shoulder and not the center of your chest), simultaneously press your left knee away from you. This combination of actions should provide ample sensation, but if you don't feel much, try releasing your pubic bone down away from your navel toward the floor. This will bring a bit more curve into your lumbar spine and should deepen the hip stretch.

BOOST YOUR BIRD

This variation moves more in the direction of the final shape but uses blankets to help maintain alignment. Come onto all fours with your hands shoulder-distance apart and about a hand span in front of your shoulders. Bring your left knee forward and place it on the floor just behind and slightly to the left of your left wrist, with your shin on a diagonal and your left heel pointing toward your right frontal hipbone (*figure 2*). Now bring your atten-



tion to your back leg: Your right quadriceps should squarely face the floor so that your leg is in a “neutral” position—you want to avoid the common pitfall of externally rotating the back leg. Establish this neutral leg by tucking your right toes under and straightening your right leg so that the thigh and knee come off the floor. Lift your right inner thigh up toward the ceiling and move your right frontal hipbone forward so that it is parallel to your left frontal hipbone. You want to have your hipbones square toward the front of the mat. As you roll your right hipbone forward, draw your left outer hip back and in toward the midline of your body. Its natural tendency will be to swing forward and out away from you.

When your hipbones are parallel in Pigeon, the sacrum is less likely to be torqued, and you can practice the pose without straining your low back. Maintaining this hip alignment, shimmy your right toes back slightly, and then point them so that your right thigh releases to the floor. Move your left foot and shin toward the front of your mat, aiming for your shin to be parallel to the front edge, and flex your foot the way you did in Eye of the Needle to protect your knee.

Now observe your left outer hip. If, after you square your hips, the area where your thigh and buttock meet doesn't rest on the floor, you need to add a blanket or two underneath. This is crucial to practicing the pose safely. If the outer hip doesn't have support, the body will fall to the left, making the hips uneven and distorting the sacrum. Or, if the hips stay square but your left hip is free-floating, you'll put too much weight and pressure on the front knee. Neither scenario is good!

GET EVEN

Use your arms for support as you organize your lower body. Adjust so that your hipbones are parallel to the wall you're facing and your sacrum is even (meaning one side hasn't dipped closer to the floor than the other), and place however many blankets are necessary to maintain this alignment beneath your left outer hip.

Place your hands in front of your left shin and use your arms to keep your torso

hip connections

People tend to either love or loathe poses like Pigeon. Regardless of which camp you inhabit, keep in mind that Pigeon can help safeguard your precious knees and low back and make the other poses in your practice infinitely more pleasant. Here's a look at its tremendous benefits.

◆ Open hips can mean less back pain. Tight hip flexors pull your pelvis forward and exaggerate the curve in your lower back. Picture your entire pelvis as a bowl of water spilling toward your toes, with the back side of the bowl raised up. When your lumbar becomes shortened, you're likely to feel compression and discomfort over time. You'll notice it in your poses, too. If your hip flexors are short in a pose like Warrior I or Camel, your lower back will overdo the arch, and you'll feel pain. Open hip flexors help bring the pelvis back to neutral and mitigate pain.

◆ Hip openers help your knees. Here's an example: When your outer hips are relatively open in a pose like Warrior II,

upright. For the final version, keep moving your left foot forward, working to make your left shin parallel to the front edge of your mat. Make sure that in doing so you maintain the alignment in your hips and sacrum, continuing to use blankets if necessary. The left leg will be in external rotation, the right leg in neutral—each position giving access to a different type of hip opening. The right leg will stretch the psoas and other hip flexors, and the left side will get into the group of rotators in the buttocks and outer hip.

In this pose, you may experience intense sensations in the left hip as the femur rotates outward in the hip socket. (For many people, these sensations arise in the fleshy part of the buttock; others feel it more along the inner thigh.) Additionally, some feel a stretch along the front of the right hip as the psoas lengthens. You *do not*, however, want to feel any sensations in your left knee. If you do, this variation is not for you! Return to Eye of the Needle, where you can safely open your hips without strain.

you'll be able to rotate your front thigh out and line up your front knee toward the pinkie side of the toes. But if that area is tight, your knee will buckle in toward your big toe, which can strain the inner knee. So if you're unable to externally rotate the femur bone in the hip socket (which is one result of tight hips), the smaller and more delicate knee joint can become overworked.

◆ The hip is a ball-and-socket joint constructed for movement in a whole slew of directions, including rotation (as opposed to the knee, which is a hinge joint that is supposed to bend and extend but not rotate). The great thing about Pigeon is that if you practice it on both sides, you get flexion and extension of your knees and your hips. The added bonus is that you get external rotation of the femur in your hip socket, too. Barring injury, it's a good idea to regularly take your joints through their full range of motion in your yoga practice—you'll move through your daily life with more ease.

If your knee is sensation free (hooray!), extend your torso forward across your left shin, walking your arms out in front of you and releasing your forehead toward the floor. Fold forward only after you've spent time checking your alignment and paying attention to your body. Your left knee will be to the left of your torso (with the left thigh on a bit of a diagonal), and your flexed left foot will be just alongside the right side of your rib cage. As you fold forward, turn your attention inward.

We tend to hold this version of Pigeon longer than more active postures, so see if part of your practice in this pose can be to stay mentally focused once you have settled in. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali defines practice as “effort toward steadiness.” In these extended, quieter holds, you get to explore this idea, tethering your scattered attention by following the breath as it moves in and out, finding stillness as you open and expand. ❀

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Do the Twist

Create suppleness in the spine as you tone muscles and stimulate organs.

A FEW YEARS AGO, some friends and I performed an eye-opening experiment. We painted the body's major organs, glands, nerves, and muscles on a long white unitard. Then one of us donned the outfit and moved through a series of yoga postures as the rest of us watched. We observed the kidney area being squeezed in backbends, the stomach being compressed in forward bends, and the ribs and lungs being gracefully stretched in sidebending actions.

Watching my friend move through a series of spine-wringing twists was the most illuminating of all. Twisting seemed to alternately



DO keep the knee of the bent leg anchored on the floor. Use a blanket if necessary to fully anchor the knee.



DO keep the sides of the neck long as you relax and draw the shoulder blades down the back.



RIGHT THIGHBONE REACHES
TOWARD THE RIGHT KNEE

BOTH SIDES OF THE WAIST
ARE EQUALLY LONG

HEAD LOOKS
TO THE RIGHT

SHOULDER BLADES RELAX
TOWARD THE HIPS

BACK BODY IS LONG
AND UNWRINKLED

LEFT SHOULDER
RESTS ON THE FLOOR

RIGHT KNEE IS FIRMLY
GROUNDED ON THE FLOOR

two-legged twist

MODIFICATION



WHY DO IT

This variation offers a gentler wringing action for the abdomen without sacrificing the benefits of Reclining Twist.

HERE'S HOW

Lie on your back with both legs bent and your feet resting on the floor. Then bring your feet together about a foot from your tailbone. Rest your arms on the floor at shoulder height with the palms up. As you exhale, drop both knees toward the left, keeping the left edge of the left foot in contact with the floor. As you do this, press actively through the right shoulder to maintain its contact with the earth. After several breaths, return the knees to their starting position and repeat on the second side.

squeeze and stretch the entire contents of the torso—muscles, nerves, glands, and organs—from the pelvis all the way up through the neck. After seeing this untard demo, I'm not surprised that twists are renowned for their balancing and toning powers, and for their ability to cleanse the body from head to toe.

Twists are often taught as balms for sluggish digestion, low energy, stifled breathing, and a variety of muscle aches and pains. Best of all, they feel good from the inside out. Reclining Twist offers an opportunity to feel the power of wringing out the body from its core. It can improve breathing, ease back and neck tension, and soothe frazzled nerves. Its reclined position lets us linger in the posture's curves and spirals, inviting the twist to penetrate deep into the spine. If you're anything

like me, this pose will leave you feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, and rinsed clean.

EASE INTO THE EARTH

To begin, lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet comfortably on the floor. If your neck and shoulders feel tense, or if your chin juts up toward the sky instead of settling comfortably toward your chest, elevate your head a few inches with a folded blanket or pillow.

Take a few moments to make sure the back body is long. Roll gently toward your left side and slip your right shoulder blade down toward the hips to create additional space between the ear and shoulder. Repeat this action on the other side.

To relax the lower back, lift the hips off the ground and gently draw the tailbone toward the heels. Maintain this length as

you set the pelvis back down. Let a few soft breaths ripple through your body as you surrender to gravity's embrace.

Consider the sensations in your back body. If you notice that you are at all kinked up or wrinkled, adjust your position until you feel as if you are resting atop a well-made bed rather than a tired and lumpy mattress.

Invite the skin of the back body to spread and soften, settling with ease and relief into the earth. Try to let go as you rest quietly here, breathing comfortably and drawing your awareness inward.

ROCK AND ROLL

When you feel the urge to move, grab hold of the back of the right thigh or the shin with your hands and draw the right knee toward your ribs. (If you find it difficult to reach your leg, wrap a strap behind the knee, hold one end of the strap with each hand, and gently bring the knee toward you.) Rock gently from side to side to massage the lower back, and invite your exhalations to lengthen.

Still drawing the right knee toward your chest, slowly straighten the left leg by reaching your foot toward the end of your mat. Ideally, the leg will end up fully outstretched, as in Savasana (Corpse Pose). If this action causes you to wince, though, extend the leg only as far as is comfortable. Linger here for just a few moments, allowing the leg and hip muscles to release while encouraging the breath to feel as free and rhythmic as possible.

Now comes the fun part. Imagine that you're lounging around in bed on a sleepy Saturday morning. Roll onto your left side, bringing your right knee and both arms along with you as you turn. You should end up on your left side from ear to ankle, with your right hip stacked directly on top of your left and both arms resting on the floor to your left. If rolling over feels awkward or gawky, bend your right arm so the fingertips point upward, then press the right elbow firmly into the floor on your right side. This should give you a little leverage to roll toward the left without feeling any strain.

Once you've rolled over, take a moment to assess the situation. For some, the right

knee will drop easily toward the floor. For others, the floor will feel like it's a million miles away. If the latter is the case for you, slip a folded blanket or bolster between the right knee and the earth. In this twist, it's more important that the right knee is supported enough for you to feel grounded than to force the leg to reach all the way to the floor.

FREE YOUR TORSO

Before completing the twist, visualize the possibility of maintaining the well-rooted feeling of the lower body—with the pelvis still looking toward the left. From the pelvis down, you'll stay nestled on your left side in that sleepy Saturday-morning pose. However, from the rib cage up, you will spin toward the right—ending up relaxed and lying on your back as if you were resting in Savasana.

To do this, first anchor the inner right knee by imagining that you're stitching it to the ground. Press the left elbow into the floor to help you rise up lightly through the chest, so the ribs and heart can spin toward the right ever so slightly. As you do this, reach the right arm up above the body and extend from the heart all the way through the fingertips, with the palm facing the same direction as the face.

Now imagine you have eyes in the front of your heart. When you are resting on your left side, these eyes are looking toward the left. But as you revolve the upper chest toward the right, the heart spins so it gazes up toward the sky. This deep rotation at the body's core will encourage the right arm and shoulder blade to sweep outward toward the floor on your right side. Let the head follow the action of the twist, so you end up looking toward your right hand.

It is likely that in the beginning, muscle tightness will prevent the right shoulder from releasing completely onto the ground as you spin the upper body open. If this is the case for you, don't despair. Instead, bend the right arm and rest your hand on your ribs. Positioning your arm in this way is a better solution than plopping your right hand onto the ground while the shoulder still bobs in space, which risks straining the upper body.

In your mind's eye, trace a diagonal line from your right knee to your right hand and then lengthen through the torso along that line. If you feel yourself kinking up in the right waist, place your right thumb in the hip crease and actively draw the right hip away from your shoulder and toward your feet. Then bring the right arm back to its place.



The action of twisting will compress the diaphragm, so you may feel your breathing get shallower. Bring your attention to the space you have created in the right side of the rib cage and imagine flooding the right lung with your breath.

Once you've settled as far into the twist as your body will allow, release any sense of effort and let gravity do the rest of the work. Enjoy the deep spiral of the spine. When you feel the urge to unwind, release out of the posture and lie flat on your back in Savasana.

EXPLORE ASYMMETRY

Remain here for a few moments and take stock of any new sensations moving through you. After exploring the asymmetry of this twist, you will likely note that the two sides of your body—your shoulders, ribs, belly, hips, and legs on the left and right—feel like they belong

to different creatures. How does your right shoulder feel compared with your left? Can you detect any new pattern to your breathing after practicing just one side of Reclining Twist? Does your spine feel more fluid and free?

When you're ready, repeat the pose on the second side. Because twists are asymmetrical, it's important to spend equal time on both sides to create overall balance. Remember, the name of the game in this exploration is to anchor the legs while revolving the spine and torso in the opposite direction; on the second side, that action will maximize the stretch in the left side of the body.

When you've reached your comfortable limit, remember to settle in and breathe. Soften the body, relax the skin, and surrender into the stretch of the twist. Observe how, breath by breath, time and gravity allow you to release ever more deeply into the pose, wringing out your spine from bottom to top.

Now sink, stretch, ooze, and release. Relinquish any grasping from your bones all the way out through the skin, so you feel softer, warmer, and stretchier. In your mind, trace the snakelike spiral of the twist from your tailbone to the top of your head. Linger here for a few more breaths, yielding and growing more supple with each exhalation.

When you're ready, unravel yourself, coming onto your back. Draw both knees toward your chest, rocking gently from side to side; place your arms and legs on the floor and settle into Savasana. Let your breathing be full and deep, with each inhalation bringing you renewal and vitality, and each exhalation offering a sweet sigh of relief.

Before you move on with your practice or your day, note the effects of the twist—you might feel an evenness in your body from left to right, an increased ability to breathe deeply, or a sense of stillness and equanimity—and bring this increased awareness with you the next time you come to your mat. ❀

Claudia Cummins teaches yoga in central Ohio. Visit claudiacummins.com to read a selection of her essays.



Peace Process

Fold forward to find balance between effort and ease.

THE ACT OF FOLDING OVER in a pose like Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) is like retreating into your own personal cave. Distractions recede from your awareness, making

way for introspection. Paschimottanasana is also thought to improve digestive function, calm your mind and nerves, relieve headaches and menstrual cramps, and increase agility in your hips, legs, and lower back.

Its gifts are many, but for years Paschimottanasana was my husband's nemesis posture. When Paul began a serious yoga practice when he was in his 20s, he had very stiff hamstrings that barely let him nudge his torso forward in the pose. It took months of sitting almost upright with a strap around his feet and diligently lifting his back before he could let go of the strap and catch hold of his feet. That should have been celebrated as a great milestone, but Paul was all too aware that he had a long way to go before he brought a long torso over his legs without hunching his back.

Paul put intense effort into his practice and tried to go deeper in the pose, but it wasn't until he began to apply nonattachment that he could work on Paschimottanasana without a painful struggle. The seemingly opposing concepts of effort or perseverance (*abhyasa*) and nonattachment (*vairagya*) appear early in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra (1.12), and they are often referred to as the two wings of yoga practice. You



DON'T round your back, drop your elbows, or hunch your shoulders to get your head down.



DO lengthen the front of the torso and pull your shoulders away from your ears.

forward bends

forward bends



Use a strap to make your back concave as you begin to fold forward.

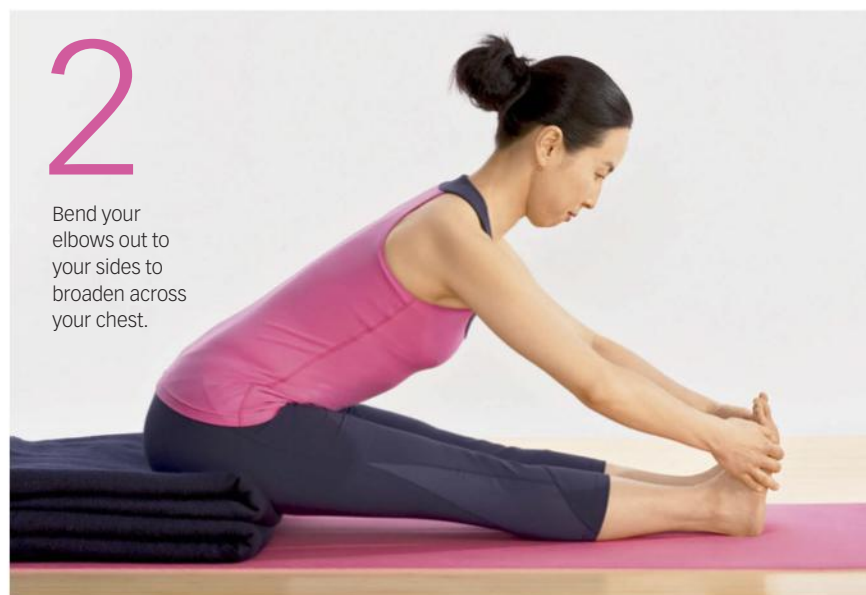
LIFTOFF

The first phase of Paschimottasana (*figure 1*) stretches tight hamstrings and teaches you how to lengthen your lower back and move forward from the hips. Lengthening the spine is crucial in this pose: If you bend from the spine to come forward, you risk putting pressure on the muscles and disks of the lower back—a recipe for injury. Instead, you want to lengthen forward from your hips and create a concave shape with the back.

Before starting, prepare your legs, hips, and spine with some standing poses and Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). Then sit on the edge of two neatly folded blankets in Dandasana (Staff Pose). If you can't straighten your legs, or if your sacrum or lower back is rounding, sit up higher on more blankets. Once you have your foundation, place your hands on the ground by your hips, press your thighs into the floor, and lift the sides of your torso.

Place a strap around the arches of your feet and hold an end of the strap in each hand. Come back into an upright position, press your legs firmly into the floor, and on an inhalation, lift the entire front of your torso from the bottom of the pelvis to the throat. Pull on the belt, drawing your arms back into the shoulder sockets, and lift your chest up as if you were trying to raise your bottom ribs above the level of your arms. Then, on an exhalation, walk your hands down the strap and closer to the feet, maintaining the lift of the front body. Keep your arms straight. If any part of your back begins to round, apply a little *vairagya* and take a measured, considered walk back up the strap. That might mean your forward fold is more upright, which is perfectly OK.

Sometimes the knees and feet turn out or become loose in this pose, which can tighten the lower back. To keep the legs firm, press the inner edge of each leg into the floor and extend the back of your heels away from your pelvis. As your calves reach forward in the direction of your heels, imagine that your hamstrings stretch back toward your buttocks, as if you were pushing the blankets behind you with your buttocks.



Bend your elbows out to your sides to broaden across your chest.

need to apply both to find the peaceful stillness that yoga promises. Abhyasa is informed effort with the goal of self-understanding. Vairagya is detachment from the final results of your actions; it involves reflection, stillness, and surrender. For example, if you're sufficiently flexible in the final version of the pose, the entire front of the torso and head rest on the legs. But if you're stiffer, you may have to surrender the idea of taking your head down and instead put your effort into working patiently on folding from

the hips and keeping a long spine so that the front and back of your torso both lengthen evenly.

When you're able to balance effort and surrender and apply this approach to Paschimottasana (or to any other asana), your frustration with your limitations will lessen, and you'll experience the pose's physical and mental benefits. Distracting thoughts and mental agitation will decrease, and you'll be able to enter your personal refuge—that is, a calm, wakeful state of pervasive attention.

Stay in the pose for another minute, with your hands about shoulder-width apart so that your chest doesn't narrow. Move the shoulder blades and back ribs forward toward the chest, and spread your collarbones apart. Employ abhyasa as you engage the middle back, where you may especially feel the effort of the back muscles contracting to support the lift of your chest. To come out, let go of your belt, inhale, and sit up straight, returning to Dandasana. If you suffer from lower-back problems or are very stiff, you may want to continue practicing this version before going on to the next phase.

THE LOWDOWN

In this second phase (*figure 2*), you hold the sides of your feet to get more extension in the sides of your torso while broadening across your chest and shoulders and moving farther toward your feet.

Begin in Dandasana as you did previously. Inhale and extend your arms straight up overhead. Lift the sides of your rib cage and waist. On an exhalation, reach forward and clasp your outer feet. Pull on your feet and draw your arms back as you did in the first variation, to make your back concave. Flatten your thighs into the floor and move your buttocks back as you inhale and lengthen your abdomen forward. Broaden the top of your chest so that the shoulders, collarbones, neck, and throat remain soft.

On your next exhalation, begin to bend your elbows out to the sides, and lengthen your torso toward the feet. Don't drop the elbows, but keep them level with the shoulders. Push through your inner heels as you continue to widen your elbows, keeping the top chest broad. Spread the shoulders away from each other so that your upper back feels wide as well.

Now that your torso is broad, create more length. Pull the sides of your waist forward toward your side ribs, the side ribs toward your armpits, and the armpits toward your elbows. This will help you maintain the length of your front torso so that your back doesn't form a hump.

If you find that your abdomen is tightening, your effort has become aggressive. Balance your perseverance with vairagya

by coming up slightly, extending your legs, and lifting your ribs away from your abdomen. Otherwise, continue to extend deeper into the pose by drawing your chest closer to your feet for up to a minute. Then, on an inhalation, let go of your feet, lift your arms to the ceiling again, and return to Dandasana.



DEEP FOLD

If you were able to keep your torso long while going forward in the previous variations, you can now attempt the final pose, which involves folding down while lengthening forward. Starting in Dandasana, inhale and lift the arms skyward to open your front body. Exhale, lengthen forward, and clasp your heels with your hands. Lift your chest and make your back concave again. Pull the outer edges of your feet toward your pelvis as you push forward through your inner heels. Broaden the soles of your feet.

On the next exhalation, bend your elbows to the sides and begin to pull your torso forward. Turn the tops of your thighs inward and press them strongly down so that you feel your hamstrings lengthen and widen on the floor. Even though you are working to spread your hamstrings and buttocks, your hips should feel compact. Press your outer thighs and hips into the floor. Lengthening the hamstrings and spreading the buttocks will help you pivot

from the hips and release the lower spine forward, away from the hips. Compacting the hips can propel the sides of your waist forward and protect your hamstrings from overstretching. From the top of your buttocks, lengthen your entire lower back toward your head. Ideally, you'll feel as though your hamstrings go back while your spine moves forward.

As you take your head down, keep the sides of the neck long. If your head doesn't reach your legs, or if you find that the throat is constricted, the chest is closing, or your head is much lower than your chest, place a blanket, bolster, or block on top of your shins to support your head. Keep the back of the neck parallel to the floor, not diagonally slanting downward.

FEEL FREE

Now that you have gone deeper in the pose, observe what is happening along your spine. If you feel as though your bottom ribs are stuck to your abdomen, you are folding from the waist rather than the hips. So, come up slightly to free your lower abdomen, spread the diaphragm, and lengthen the front of your torso from the pelvis toward your chest. To refine the pose, move your back ribs down to bring your front ribs closer to your thighs.

It's a lot to keep in mind, but be patient. If you find yourself getting frustrated, work intelligently with the breath. On the inhalation, focus on lengthening the front of your torso and working your legs. On the exhalation, focus on lengthening forward. During and at the end of the exhalation, you may also experience tension being released for a few moments, allowing you to go deeper into the pose without aggression. This release is an important component of forward bending with abhyasa and vairagya, as it helps you create inner space and freedom. With your forehead resting, your brain can relax from the activity of constantly processing information. In this position, you can enter a sanctuary for a stressed mind and rest in a deep sense of peace. ✨

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A decorative graphic featuring a trail of small blue and white stars and larger blue stars, accompanied by light blue swirling lines, arching across the top of the page.

heavenly rest

For the fullest experience of yoga and a deep connection with your vital energies, Savasana, or Corpse Pose, is one posture you can't live without.

THERE I WAS, cocooned in warmth and darkness, feeling as light as air and as relaxed and carefree as a million-dollar Lotto winner on a Caribbean beach. I might have been a space traveler in suspended animation, rocketing off at light speed to a new solar system, or even an infant in the womb, except that I had a vague sense I was watching myself in a state of what could best be described as alert relaxation.

Begin to bring awareness to your inhalation ... That voice ... so familiar. Cautiously, I opened one eye and found that I was not floating along on a river of soothing darkness or soaring through the outer reaches of the Milky Way, but lying motionless on the floor of Om Tara Yoga Studio in Massapequa, New York.

When you're ready, gently roll to one side ... observe how you feel ... It was Maria Yakkey, my regular Thursday-morning yoga

teacher. Soon, a half-dozen classmates and I were alert and energized, sitting in Sukhasana (Easy Pose) with our legs crossed, bowing to the Divine within.

Namaste. Then class was over.

As I was clearing up my props, Maria came over. "John," she said. "You're really getting better at Savasana."

I almost dropped a pair of blocks on my foot. Better? At *Savasana*? You mean, my ability to imitate a corpse has improved?

"You used to be more fidgety," she said.

Understand: I'm an overcaffeinated, Type A New York guy—and on top of that, I'm an avid marathon runner and gym rat. Of course I'm fidgety, and it's clear to me that I need yoga. Still, I thought, of all the things I haven't done well in my seven years of practice—which, to my mind, was almost everything—surely, lying quietly on the floor was the exception.

"So," I said, "I'm getting better at lying on the floor?"

Maria sighed and looked at me reproachfully. "Savasana is a lot more than just lying on the floor." ➔

BY JOHN HANC

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREA COBB

➔ Now, don't get me wrong: I enjoy that delicious rest at the end of class. But until I gave it serious consideration, I thought of Savasana as a yogic chill pill, built into the end of practice to calm yuppies and soccer moms before they climb back into their SUVs and start texting their way to the nearest Starbucks.

But Maria is right. Savasana is much more. This traditional Indian yoga practice is a very purposeful resting pose. If you stay alert and keep your mind from wandering while practicing Corpse Pose, you're bound to reap enormous benefits. By lying down and resting after practicing asana, you can experience what teachers call Presence or Being—that quality of awareness that is not dependent on your external circumstances, your body type, your personality, or your activities, but that simply *is*—the part of you that is present even when your body and mind have temporarily “died” from the duties and pleasures of daily life. In the quiet stillness of Savasana, your body and mind have a chance to synthesize all the actions, instructions, and sensations you experienced in class. It gives you an opportunity to integrate your experiences from practice so that you can carry that calm, heightened awareness into every situation you encounter thereafter. Many teachers consider it to be the most important asana, because this quiet, humble pose can bring you closest to the true spirit and goal of yoga, the realization that you are part of something larger than your individual self.



a savasana to die for

Follow Richard Rosen's nuanced instructions for what might appear to be a very simple pose, and feel your mind, body, and breath release deeply into Savasana.

Lie on your back and bring your body into as neutral a position as possible. Your brain experiences misalignment in Savasana as a disturbance, so the more you're able to bring yourself into balance, the more your brain will quiet down. Once this happens, what you normally perceive as the limits of your body start to soften and dissolve, and you begin to feel consciously expansive.

Place your arms by your sides at a 45-degree angle to your torso with your hands palms-up, each one resting on the same knuckle. Adjust your legs so that they're at equal angles from a midline drawn

through your torso, with your heels only a few inches apart. Move your head so your ears are an equal distance from your shoulders, and your eyes are an equal distance from the ceiling, so your head is not tilted or turned. The more you can bring your body into a neutral position, the more your brain can let go.

Once you're in a neutral position, make sure your tongue is resting on the floor of your mouth. Your tongue has its own midline, so you want to be sure to spread the tongue from the midline out, equally on both sides. Drop your eyes toward the back of their sockets. Soften your nose and deepen your ear canals so that you're listening to the sound of your breath from deep inside the back of your head. And finally, soften the skin of the bridge of your nose, or the space between your eyebrows.

Once you feel settled in your center and notice your organs of perception softening, visualize your brain inside your skull. Imagine that you can feel your brain shrinking, getting smaller and smaller, moving away from the inner lining of the skull. Then imagine your brain releasing onto the back of your head.

Keep your eyes as still as possible, resting in the back of their sockets.

☆ gratefully dead

Despite its many benefits for body and mind, more than a few practitioners still view Savasana as an afterthought, the yogic equivalent of the cooldown in an aerobic workout—ideal if you have time but not essential. Also, boring.


“I have students who try to sneak out the door as Savasana is beginning,” says John Friend, the founder of Anusara Yoga. “They feel vulnerable lying still for 5 or 10 minutes.” Others see it as siesta time. “I have another who falls asleep immediately,” he says. “He drops off like a rock.”

But this master teacher educates his students around the world to understand that Savasana is not synonymous with napping or checking out in any way. In fact, it is just the opposite. This seemingly simple pose can lead, Friend says, to the “experience of ultimate freedom.” You want to stay awake for it.

Some modern schools of yoga take this pose very seriously. Practitioners of Sivananda Yoga begin a 90-minute class with Savasana—to relax the body and prepare the mind for the work ahead. They also include it between the postures (allowing

the breath to circulate freely and to both invigorate the nervous system and protect it from overstimulation) and then again at the end of practice, to bring the yogi back into balance.

“It gives a wonderful sense of calm,” says Swami Sadasivananda, former director of



On your inhalation, receive the breath without effort. Feel your brain recede from your forehead and release toward the back of your head. On your exhalation, allow the breath to release gracefully.

For the next few minutes, it's important to stay as still and present as possible. Allow the mass of your body to sink onto the back of your body—onto your heels, your calves, your buttocks and torso, the backs of your arms, and the back of your head. Feel your connection to the floor and maintain an awareness of your breath and the ambient sounds from the room around you to keep you rooted to the present moment throughout your Savasana.

One way to gauge the time you might spend in Savasana is to plan to stay at least 5 minutes for every 30 minutes you've practiced. Otherwise, you can lie back and enjoy this delicious pose for 5 to 20 minutes.



the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center in New York City. “Savasana is an important time for students to assimilate all the benefits from the practice of asanas. During Savasana, there is a complete recharge and rejuvenation of the body, mind, and spirit.”

☆ *the beginning of the end*

According to Aadil Palkhivala, founder of Alive and Shine Center in Bellevue, Washington, Savasana is real yoga—defined as an “act of union” between your “self with a small s, your ego, and your Self with a capital S—the spirit.” Because you’re encouraged to release your mind’s occupation with the distractions of daily life, “Savasana is conducive to making that connection,” he says.

Of course, simply assuming Corpse Pose will not in itself make the connection between the small-s self and the capital-S Self for you. But one of yoga’s promises is that if you live your life with the intention to closely observe yourself with as much honesty as you can, the union of self and Self can truly be forged. Savasana creates the space for that quiet reflective inquiry and that union.

I admit that my ego is far from integrated with spirit: My male ego in class eagerly shows off my proficiency in Plank and Chaturanga, the only two poses I’m convinced that I can do “better” than my female classmates, who are far more flexible and adept than I am. Still, even though I’m far from perfect, I can feel perfectly at peace in Savasana. In Savasana, Friend says, “the spirit, the very essence of our being, is not clinging or caught in the physical realm.”

☆ *rest in peace*

Savasana’s success starts not with instruction, but location: “You want a place that is quiet, somewhat dark ... a place that is comfortable yet stable,” Friend says. These conditions will help foster what he calls “an internal drawing in and settling” that helps clear the deck for the Savasana voyage.

Then comes a careful positioning of your body. Savasana, I discovered, is not just lying on the floor. “What’s really important for a good Savasana is to lie in a neutral position,” says Richard Rosen, a *Yoga Journal* contributing editor and Bay Area yoga instructor. “Your head should lie square and equidistant from each shoulder.” Arms should be by your sides, at a 45-degree angle relative to the torso. (This keeps your shoulders loose and your breathing unrestricted.) It also means lying in a straight line, with your arms or legs not tilted or bent to one side, and your head not drooping. “Stay in line as much as possible,” suggests Palkhivala. “Energy flows in smooth lines. So if your head is crooked, your pelvis is tilted to one side, and your body looks like a serpent, the energy won’t flow.”

Are you comfortable? Straight, balanced, and relaxed as you lie on the floor of a still, dark room? Wonderful. Now comes the real work and pleasure of Savasana. “This is the time to go inside and find the spirit within,” Palkhivala says.

Good luck, if you’re anything like me.

“It’s hard to stop the mind from wandering,” Rosen acknowledges. “You have to continuously back off from your thoughts. Try to withdraw and look at them from above.”

☆ *1,000 ways to die*

The Savasana experience can be as diverse as the yogis who teach it. Maria, my teacher at Om Tara, creates a warm and comfortable atmosphere for Savasana in our Thursday classes. She draws the blinds, drapes us with blankets, places eye pillows on us, and allows Corpse Pose to unfold in silence.

Jeff Logan, a certified Iyengar Yoga teacher, does it a bit differently at his studio, Body & Soul Fitness and Yoga Center in Huntington, New York. Savasana with him is peaceful but not quiet. He talks the class through a systematic relaxation of jaws, arms, hands, abdomen, and legs, encouraging us to “let go” of our tongue, ears, and skin. At the end, Jeff asks each of us to lie in a fetal position—“like a newborn,” he says. After he brings us up into a seated position, he invites us to open our eyes and greet the world around us like a reborn child.

This idea of Corpse Pose as a symbolic rebirth is intriguing. In Jeff’s class, I ran with it. Like an infant, what I wanted to do now was eat. So, having thought about nothing, I started to calmly observe that I was thinking about lunch. Having successfully been a fidget-free corpse, I was ready to go about my day as an even more fully functioning, self-observing, live human being ... with a little help from a well-done Savasana. ❖

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● *by Janice Gates*

peace of mind



● *illustrations by Scott Bakal*

In the Yoga Sutra, the sage Patanjali defines yoga as *citta vritti nirodha*: When you cease to identify with your thoughts, then your heart, mind, and body unify and you recognize your true nature. Meditation is the means for getting there—though it's not often taught in modern yoga. To *really* move beyond the basics, you need to cultivate concentration so that meditative states can arise in your practice and in your life. Here's our guide to getting on the cushion and getting started.



a get-started guide for would-be meditators

Meditation can seem complicated. In truth, it's easy. All you need is time, patience, and a technique that works for you.

Like asana, meditation takes discipline. If your toes start to curl when you hear the D-word, redefine “discipline” as developing a positive habit.

Begin by finding a quiet space and scheduling a regular time to practice. Perhaps early mornings work best because they occur before you get caught up in the busyness of the day. The simplest way to integrate meditation into your life is to follow your asana practice with pranayama (breathwork) and Savasana (Corpse Pose), and then sit back up in a comfortable position for meditation. Practicing the asanas themselves can also be a form of meditation. At the very least, poses help to prepare the body and mind for meditation by taking you inward.

Then, take a moment to check in with where you are starting—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Ask yourself: What is my motivation for today's practice? Why do I want to cultivate focused attention anyway? It might be that you want to feel calmer at work or find some relief from a difficult time you're going through. Whatever your answer, make it an intention for your practice, imbuing your meditation with meaning.

The next step is to begin training your mind to focus on, and stay with, one thing for an extended period. For seated meditation, you might either close your eyes or keep them slightly open, which would help keep you alert if you're a little sleepy. Various meditation techniques—like those presented on the following pages—train you to unify, calm, and center the mind and find focused attention. This attention will allow you to begin to see, but not get caught up in, the habits and pat-

terns of your mind. With that comes the freedom to connect more fully with your deeper wisdom.

Of course, even the most seasoned meditators experience floods of thoughts. When the thoughts arise, gently and lovingly invite your mind to return to the technique you've chosen as an anchor for your attention.

Once you begin to notice how out of control the mind is, you will learn to not take all of the thoughts that come up so seriously, and will start to develop compassion toward yourself. Some meditators liken this process to the process of training a puppy. If you train a dog by beating it, it will become obedient, inflexible, and neurotic. If you train the little guy with kindness and firmness, your pet will learn confidence and trust.

It takes time to develop a new habit, so be patient with yourself. Begin with 5 to 10 minutes and progressively build up to 30 to 45 minutes of quiet meditation. (You might find it helpful to use a timer so that you don't have to watch the clock.)

Try all of the practices on the following pages—maybe devoting a week or more to each one—and see what works for you. Keep in mind that you are not trying to get anywhere, so don't get caught up in the techniques. They are simply tools; they are not the meditation itself. Meditation is ultimately a way of being with the present moment, exactly as it is, with an open heart and an open mind.



mind-focusing practices



Try one of these simple techniques to hone concentration and invite meditation.

just breathe

Find a comfortable seated position and begin by observing your natural breath. Notice the texture, length, and rhythm as the breath flows in and out of your body. Feel the temperature of the air as it touches your nostrils. Take note, too, of pauses between breaths. As thoughts arise, note them, but then allow them to float by like clouds, gently bringing your attention back to the breath. If you find it difficult to concentrate, try silently counting. For example, inhale 1, exhale 1, inhale 2, exhale 2, up to 10, and then repeat the cycle. After a while, you can stop counting and just focus on your natural breath.

chant a mantra

Traditionally, mantras are sacred words or syllables given by a teacher that are repeated as a means for awakening to the Divine. Working with sound is a powerful way to soften the critical mind and transform the energy of your internal dialogue. In yoga, Sanskrit sounds imbued with specific meanings are often used, but you can choose any sound or word that has meaning for you. You might try repeating the word *shanti* (peace) out loud as you exhale, and “peace” silently to yourself as you inhale. When thoughts arise, concentrate on the sound and the vibration of the sound in your body.

see the light

Where the eyes go, so goes your attention. *Tratak*, a Sanskrit word that means “fixed gazing,” is the practice of staring at an object to steady the mind. Place a burning candle at eye level, about two feet from where you are comfortably seated. Focus your gaze on the flame without blinking your eyes for about a minute, using the light as a focal point to return to when your mind wanders. Then close your eyes and visualize the flame at the point between your eyebrows, holding the image for as long as you can. When the image fades, open your eyes. Repeat the exercise three or four times. End your practice by rubbing your hands together until they heat up, and gently place your palms over your eyelids to bathe them in warmth.

scan your body

This is a great technique to use if you have an injury or illness that makes it uncomfortable to sit. Lie on your back with your legs straight, or prop yourself up on pillows so that you are in a reclining position. Close your eyes unless you are sleepy, in which case you can keep your eyes open. Cultivate an alert but relaxed attention as you take a mental tour of the body. Bring awareness to each part of your body, starting with the big toe, each of the other toes, the ball

of the foot, the arch. Continue in this detailed fashion to the top of your head. Ask yourself: What tension do I feel? Where is there pain? Observe any sensations—warmth, coolness, tingling, dullness, compression, and spaciousness—as you move through the body. Notice your relationship to your experience, to thoughts, images, and feelings as they arise and pass away. This is not an exercise in trying to change or judge the body, but to experience what is there. Meet what you find with friendliness and without resistance. The point is to train your mind to go where you want it to go.

step out

Walking meditation is great if you find you are too restless to sit still, and it can help widen your field of focus. Begin standing, bringing your attention to the bottoms of your feet and the contact of your feet with the surface beneath you. Lift one foot, noticing how your body weight shifts to the standing leg. Feel the standing foot spread itself over the ground. Going as slowly as you can, step forward, tracking the changes in the body as you move. Can you feel specific muscles contracting and others relaxing? At what point does your balance shift from the back leg toward the front leg? Each time your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your feet. Notice the environment around you—the colors, the scents, the textures, and any thoughts or feelings that arise—and keep bringing your attention back to the act of walking.

freeform practices

Connect with a more spacious awareness throughout the day with freeform meditations.

gaze at the sky

Nature is a powerful ally of meditation. Sometimes—when the computer crashes as you're facing a pressing deadline, or the car breaks down when you're short on money—it's easy to get caught up in the dramas of life and feel disconnected from your sense of presence. For this practice, find a place in nature where you have an uninterrupted view of the sky. Invite a soft gaze that allows you to have peripheral vision. Imagine you have eyes in the back of your head and have a 360-degree field of view. Take in the spaciousness of the sky and open to it. You are not looking for anything in particular. Instead, you're simply being with the spacious awareness as your thoughts appear and disappear. If you start to zone out, you can close your eyes and come back to your body and breath. Once you feel more connected, you can open your gaze again and keep some awareness in the body as you invite yourself back to the experience of spaciousness. Before returning to your daily activities, take a moment to ground yourself and reconnect to the earth.

zoom in and out

This practice helps you to cultivate concentration and a more spacious awareness during daily activities. Imagine that your attention has two lenses: a zoom lens and a wide-angle one. As you move through the various activities of your day, zoom in on a specific task or object, and then zoom back out again. For example, while washing the dishes, notice the feeling of the water on your hands, zooming in on the sensation. Is it warm or cool? Where do you feel it most

strongly? See if you can narrow your attention to the edges of the sensation. Then shift to a wide-angle lens. As you continue to feel all of the sensations in your hands, open to the space around you: the sounds in the room, the view in front of you, the space behind you, and the ground beneath you. Alternate between narrowing and widening your focus and notice how the changing perspectives affect your experience. ❀

Janice Gates teaches meditation and is the founder of The Yoga Garden in San Anselmo, California.



Serenity Now!

Frazzled? Fried? Try yoga's most potent anywhere, anytime de-stress Rx: Legs-up-the-Wall Pose.

RELAX LEGS

RELEASE HIPS
TOWARD FLOOR

BROADEN
COLLAR BONES

RELEASE SHOULDERS
AWAY FROM EARS

SOFTEN
THROAT

VIPARITA KARANI is my favorite pose. I know, I know: There is something wonderful to discover in every pose. But honestly, sometimes I just don't feel like bending forward or back, or I am simply too tired to balance on one leg, even for a moment. But have I ever turned down an opportunity to practice Viparita Karani? Never! I've done this pose on hotel beds around the world, against trees on yoga retreats, and in the steam room at my gym.

Viparita Karani is often called Legs-up-the-Wall Pose, but *viparita* actually means “inverted,” and *karani* means “in action.” We can interpret that to mean that the pose inverts the typical actions that happen in our bodies when we sit and stand. There are many benefits to inverting the actions in your body. Here are a few: When you put your legs up the wall with your pelvis elevated on a folded blanket, lymph and other fluids that can lead to swollen ankles, tired knees, and congested pelvic organs flow into the lower belly; this refreshes the legs and the reproductive area. This is healthy at any point in your reproductive life cycle.

This pose also gives blood circulation a gentle boost toward the upper body and head, which creates a pleasant rebalancing after you have been standing or sitting for a long time. If you are stressed, fatigued, or jet-lagged, this pose is especially refreshing. But its true greatness is that it teaches us experientially that positive results can come from doing less, not more.

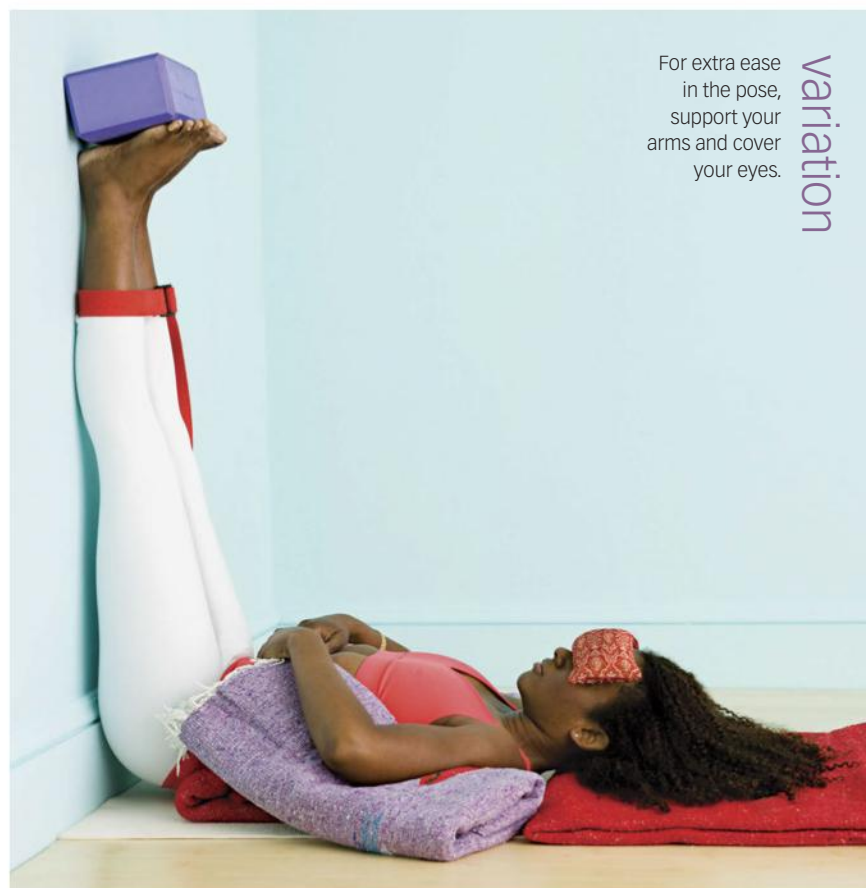
Many of us have been trained to believe we must work hard in order to reap the benefits of any particular effort, whether it is practicing yoga, being married, or running a business. And, of course, that is useful and appropriate advice at times. But Viparita Karani offers a paradigm shift in how to approach the notion of “work,” in both yoga and life. And this is the No. 1 reason I love Viparita Karani so



DON'T place a blanket under your sitting bones or tuck your pelvis.



DO put a blanket under your low back, tilt your pelvis, and release your buttocks.



For extra ease
in the pose,
support your
arms and cover
your eyes.

variation

pose benefits

Alleviates headaches

Boosts energy

Soothes menstrual cramps*

Relieves lower-back pain

contraindications

Glaucoma

Hypertension

Hernia

* Some yoga traditions advise against doing Viparita Karani during menstruation.

much. The benefits of Viparita Karani derive not just from inverting an action but also from inverting the whole notion of action. When you relax with your legs up the wall, you are practicing the polar opposite of activity, which is receptivity.

THE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

Every yoga pose has an organizing principle and a container principle. When you apply the organizing principle, you arrange your alignment so that the energetic circuitry you set up is balanced and unobstructed. Organized alignment creates the conditions for the benefits of each particular asana to arise.

Let's look at the organizing principle in Viparita Karani. To get the full benefits of the pose, you'll need to get the placement of the blanket under your hips just right. To begin, you'll also need a wall space that is clean and clear. If you are doing this at home, try to find a space that is not cluttered. Gather two blankets, a belt, and two eye pillows. If you have a bolster, bring that along.

Fold one blanket into a large square. Then fold that in thirds, creating a firm, supportive cushion. Place your blanket cushion about 12 inches from the wall. Fold the other blanket in half and place it three feet from the wall. You'll use this blanket to support your head and to fill in the space between your neck and the floor. Then sit sidesaddle on the cushion so that your right side is near the wall. Loop your yoga belt around the middle of your shins. Draw it snug but not tight.

Place your left elbow on the floor and swing your legs—like a mermaid tail—up the wall. The rest of your body will naturally go down so that you end up lying on the floor with your legs up the wall.

Now it's time to organize your body in relationship to your props and the wall. The folded blanket closest to the wall should be underneath your sacrum and low back, with enough room between the wall and your seat for your sitting bones to slightly drop over the edge of the blanket toward the floor; your hamstrings should feel comfortable, not stretched.

If your setup doesn't match these guidelines, adjust the placement of the blanket that's closest to the wall. To do so, bend your knees and place your feet flat on the wall. Press your elbows down and lift your hips up. Now reach down and move the blanket with your hands. If you need to be farther from or closer to the wall, press your feet into the wall and shimmy your shoulders forward or back. When you have finished adjusting, see how you feel.

If your pelvis feels tucked under, you are too close to the wall. Move an inch or so out from the wall or pull your blanket farther up your back. Your sitting bones should slightly roll off the blanket edge, creating a tiny curve in your back. Your groins should feel soft and hollow. You can completely relax your legs because the belt is holding them together. If you feel a big stretch in the back of your legs, your hips may be too close to the wall, so move farther from it. If you still feel strain, place your bolster vertically against the wall. The top of the bolster will probably

come near the back of your knees, allowing them to softly bend. This will release any stress in the back of the legs and also help you untuck your pelvis.

Once you are comfortably situated, with your arms resting by your sides, place an eye pillow in each of your open palms. All this organizing might take a couple of tries before you get it just right, but it is worth the effort to find the sweet spot, because you'll be staying here for awhile.

If you have more time, you can create a delicious variation with a few extra props (see *photo, opposite*). Have a heavy block or sandbag and some blankets nearby. Once you're in the pose, bend your knees, keeping your feet flexed. Place the block or sandbag on the soles of your feet, and then carefully straighten your legs. If it's hard to reach your feet, ask a friend for help. Next, place a folded blanket under each arm and rest your hands on your belly. This will let you feel as though you are floating, yet supported. Finally, place an eye pillow over your eyes.

THE CONTAINER PRINCIPLE

Have you noticed that asanas don't really exist? When we come out of a pose, that pose is no more. Asanas are impermanent forms or containers that help us focus our awareness. In a faster-moving practice, that experience is fleeting. In restorative poses, such as Viparita Karani, we invert the habit of action and abide in the container of the pose. The only "work" we are meant to do is to let go and be receptive.

You gotta love Viparita Karani: There is no warm-up for this pose. You really can do it anywhere, anytime. But just because you get into the physical position doesn't mean that you will instantly drop into a relaxing experience. A calming breath exercise may help. Inhale deeply for four counts, then exhale for eight counts. Longer exhalations slow your heart rate and calm your nervous system. Repeat five times, and then breathe naturally.

Then do nothing. Really. Let your mind float like a kite riding on a soft breeze. If you fall asleep, that's fine. If you don't, that's also fine. I do this pose when I'm stuck on a writing assignment. It acts like brain sorbet, cleansing my mental palate

and leaving me with fresh creativity. Can you be open to what happens when you let yourself rest? Maybe this container will show you something interesting. And if the most interesting thing is that you feel the energy of a fresh start when you sit up, well, that's worth a million bucks!

Stay in Viparita Karani for 5 to 20 minutes. If you are not used to restorative yoga, you may want to get up after 5 minutes, and that's fine. Over time, you will be able to stay longer. Eventually you'll trust the container of the pose to support your process of undoing, leading to more profound rejuvenation.

When you are ready to come out of the pose, bend your knees toward your chest. Roll onto your right side and rest there for several breaths. Then, press your hands into the floor and walk yourself up

Asana practice can be challenging. But when we apply ourselves to learning the poses, finally managing to hold a balance and be precise in our alignment, we usually feel a healthy sense of accomplishment.

But that feeling meets with a Catch-22, as one of the guiding principles of yoga is *santosha*, or contentment. My students often get stuck trying to understand this, confusing contentment with complacency. They ask, "If I become content with things as they are, what is my motivation to ever do anything? Isn't trying to improve a good thing?"

Those are good questions! Practicing contentment doesn't mean that you stop striving, but that you live with more acceptance of what is, celebrating the good in each moment. My suggestions for practicing contentment are to reduce, simplify, and appreciate—in that order.

REDUCE Can you shrink the number of activities you need to do to feel fulfilled? "First I'll go to yoga class and stand on my head, and then I'll have a smoothie, and then I'll meet my friend for a movie, and then..." The first step toward contentment is to

find contentment

notice how little you really need to be happy. When you schedule fewer things, you create space in your day for noticing the natural contentment that's always present.

SIMPLIFY Can you simply do the one thing you're doing right now and nothing else? I often see yoga students fidgeting away on their yoga mats, reorganizing their alignment. Instead, I invite you to be satisfied with your pose as it is. Try organizing the setup of a pose with no more than two or three adjustments, and then simply abide there. Can you allow the pose to unfold for you? You might be surprised at the mental spaciousness that arises from simplifying your actions.

APPRECIATE Appreciation is the cherry on the top of contentment. The first two steps are semi-renunciations leading you to an open place where you can recognize the goodness that was there all the time without having to add anything else. This is how yoga invites us to relate to a healthy sense of accomplishment. Not a notch on our yoga belt begging for more achievement, but an appreciation for all the goodness that we are so fortunate to experience in our practice—and life.

to sitting, letting your head come up last. Slide the belt off your legs and sit on your blanket, with your back at or near the wall. Sit quietly for a few minutes and feel the effects of your practice.

Viparita Karani shows us that the feminine, receptive aspect of our practice can be as important as the active, or masculine, element. The hidden message of Viparita Karani is something many women already know but don't always heed. Back in my college days, whenever I complained about obstacles, my dad would encourage me to keep up my good work, but I can still hear my mom's voice saying sympathetically, "Oh, don't worry so much. Go put your legs up the wall." ❖

Cyndi Lee is an author, artist, and yoga teacher as well as the founder of OM Yoga Center.



TRUE beauty

Celebrate your natural radiance
with four Ayurvedic self-care rituals
that nourish body and spirit.

by Niika Quistgard

• • •

Each morning across India, people offer prayers to the resplendent goddess Lakshmi. Adorned in a red silk sari with copious golden ornaments, Lakshmi Devi's luminous skin, gleaming hair, and magnetic eyes signal her enchantment. She is Beauty.

According to Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of health and longevity, the kind of beauty Lakshmi embodies naturally arises from simple acts of reverent self-care. When you undertake your daily routines with the knowledge that you are a precious, unique manifestation of life's energy, you embody Lakshmi's spirit.

These Ayurvedic self-care practices will kindle your radiance from head to toe. Each is an opportunity to care for your body as a sacred manifestation of life. When you honor yourself in this way—no matter your age or genetic attributes or personal style—the vitality, grace, and generous luminosity of the goddess will shine forth through you.

eyes

Rose petals cool
and refresh tired
eyes (page 96).

• • • *photography by David Martinez*

eyes

wash away cloudy vision

Our eyes both perceive and reveal our beauty. A regular eye-washing practice can leave them clear and bright, says Geetha S.R. Harigeetham, ND, who was the house doctor at Rasa Ayurveda, a now-closed women's clinic in Kerala, India. (Full disclosure: I founded Rasa Ayurveda.) Also, she notes, bathing the eyes can help rejuvenate tiny muscles that have been taxed by computer use or driving.

Harigeetham recommends infusing your washing water with *triphala*. The Ayurvedic herbal powder—made up of the amalaki, haritaki, and bibhitaki fruits—is a blood purifier and whole-body rejuvenator, and it has properties that support the ophthalmic nerves and eye muscles, she notes.

After the washing, consider applying the dark eyeliner known as *kajal* (also known as *kohl*). “Kajal reduces glare in bright light, sharpening the vision, and encourages the growth and darkness of eyelashes,” Harigeetham explains. If you choose an Ayurvedic herbal formulation—such as the **Shahnaz Husain Kohl Kajal Eyeliner** (\$8 at *shahnazhusainusa.com*), which contains almond oil and flower extracts—you’ll also be nourishing and strengthening the tissues around the eyes, she says.

...how

First, prepare the triphala infusion by boiling 1 teaspoon of triphala powder in 1 cup of water for about 10 minutes. Allow the mixture to cool completely; strain thoroughly.

first bathe Wash your face with cold water. Then, using a cupped palm, bathe each open eye with cool triphala water 3 times. Rinse the face with a bit of pure water and pat dry.



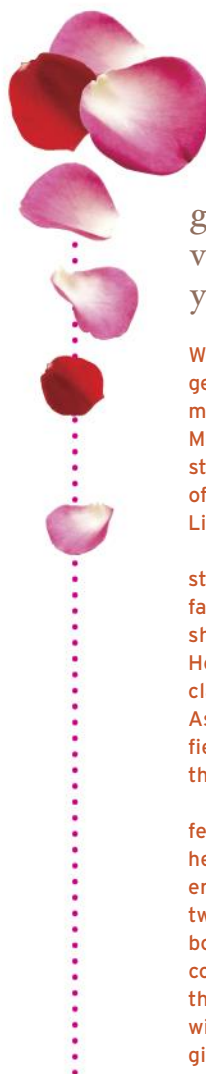
then cover Layer organically grown rose petals, cucumber slices, or cilantro leaves over each closed eye. (Choose whichever you like; all 3 are cooling and refreshing to the eyes.) Place a cotton pad over each eye; tie a band of muslin cotton or a bandanna around the eyes to create a loose blindfold.

eyeball it Lie back in Savasana, relax, and envision something beautiful. Then, keeping your eyes closed throughout, do 5 cycles each of these five eye exercises:

- * Rotate your eyes clockwise.
- * Rotate your eyes counterclockwise.
- * Move your eyes in a figure 8, looking to the upper left, lower right, upper right, lower left.
- * Look straight up and then straight down.
- * Look left and right.

then rest Now, relax your efforts and breathe for 20 minutes. Release the blindfold. Immediately direct your vision to a beautiful sight, object, or photo that makes you feel calm and connected. If you’re using kajal, apply it now.

As you transition back to your day, allow your vision to remain “soft,” letting the scene of the world come to you with effortless focus. If possible, avoid harsh lighting. Let your inner vision come forward.



feet

give some good vibration to your foundation

We all know how good it feels to get our tootsies rubbed. But foot massage as a facial? Yes, says Melanie Sachs, an Ayurvedic lifestyle counselor and the author of *Ayurvedic Beauty Care* (Lotus Light Publications).

“Foot massage can relieve eye strain, relaxing and opening the face and allowing our beauty to shine through easily,” she says. Her words are backed up by the classical Ayurvedic text the *Ashtanga Hridaya*, which identifies four major nerves in the feet that connect to the eyes.

Holding and massaging your feet with your own hands can help reintegrate the subtle-energy pathways flowing between the upper and lower body. And well-massaged feet connect more completely with the earth when you stand or sit with your feet on the ground, giving your whole being a more stable and relaxed foundation. Plus, says Sachs, “Well-oiled feet are also more protected from cracking and peeling, reducing chances for fungal and bacterial infections.”

...how

First, create a foot soak that meets your current needs, using one of the following recipes:

to cool down Fill a foot tub with cool water and mix in a tablespoon of honey and a handful each of dried lavender and fresh rose petals. You can also use lavender or rose essential oil. This will soothe the mind.

to warm up Fill a foot tub with lukewarm water and add 1 teaspoon of ginger powder. This will invigorate the body and increase circulation.

to relax and rejuvenate Fill a foot tub with very warm water and add 3 tablespoons

per gallon of Epsom salt. This will reduce any swelling and alleviate fatigue.

first soak Submerge your feet, relax for 10 minutes, then remove your feet and pat them dry. Next, give yourself a foot massage, using sesame, olive, or coconut oil. Apply the oil generously throughout your massage.

then touch Starting with your right foot, massage in circles around the ankle. With your left hand, squeeze down from the base of the calf muscle all the way to the heel bone, 3 times. Holding the heel, pull back on the ball of the foot, flexing and stretching several times. With small circular movements, massage the spaces between all the toes, pinching the webbing between finger and thumb. Glide your thumbs up and down the grooves between the tendons on top of the foot.

Now turn your foot over so the sole is facing you and hold it in both hands, with your thumbs just under the ball of the foot. Press your fingers into the top side of the foot, stretching the base of the toes apart. Then use your thumbs to “milk” each toe, sliding from the base over the tip of each toe several times.

Next, massage vigorously from heel to toe using the heel of your hand. Walk your thumbs along the outer edges of the foot, along the arch, and deeply into the edge of the heel. Use your knuckles to massage the arch to relieve back tension.

gently twist Hold your ankle with your right hand and the top of your foot with the left, rotating the foot clockwise, then counterclockwise. (“It’s a spinal twist for the foot!” says Sachs.)

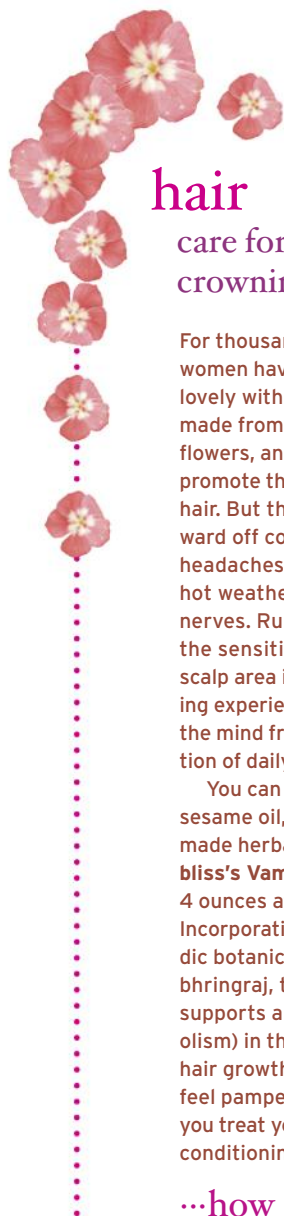
Grasp your big toe and rotate it fully, as if you were drawing a large circle with the tip of the toe. Then rub the big toe between the palms of your hands to ease neck pain and tension, and the

base of your little toe to ease shoulder tension. Finally, using the flat palm of your left hand, massage the entire sole of your foot in a figure-8 pattern.

energize Slap the sole of your foot a few times. Then press the palm of your hand to the center of the sole. This encourages a healthy flow of *apana vayu*, the grounding, downward movement of *vaṭa*, the Ayurvedic air principle. Repeat the entire sequence on the left foot.

baby steps Finally, rinse your feet with warm water, dry thoroughly, and slip them into clean cotton socks, which will allow your feet to feel protected, soft, comfortable, and responsive. Let a smile drift upward to your face.





hair

care for your crowning glory

For thousands of years, Indian women have kept their tresses lovely with sumptuous scalp oils made from coconuts, herbs, flowers, and spices. Scalp oils promote thick, lustrous, healthy hair. But they're also used to ward off colds and flu, relieve headaches, keep you cool in hot weather, and repair frayed nerves. Rubbing warm oil into the sensitive and receptive scalp area is a deliciously calming experience that helps protect the mind from the overstimulation of daily life.

You can use plain coconut or sesame oil, or pick up a ready-made herbal oil, such as **Aromabliss's Vamakesi Hair Oil** (\$17 for 4 ounces at aromabliss.com). Incorporating traditional Ayurvedic botanicals like brahmi and bhringraj, this artisanal hair oil supports a healthy *agni* (metabolism) in the scalp—the site of hair growth. Either way, you'll feel pampered and centered as you treat your hair to decadent conditioning.

...how

First, brush your hair thoroughly and wash out any hair-care products. Then, warm 2 to 3 tablespoons of oil in a metal spoon over a flame or an aromatherapy diffuser. Your scalp is more sensitive to temperature than other areas of the body, so carefully test the oil temperature for safety and comfort by trying a few drops on your inner arm.



rub it in Apply oil to the crown of your head, working downward and outward with your fingertips. Massage your scalp using a pinching motion, bringing the fingertips and thumbs together, then releasing. Move hands forward and back, then side to side, covering the entire head.

Next, make small circles on the scalp with your fingertips, maintaining an even, enjoyable pressure as you work from the hairline back to the base of the

skull. To finish the massage, rub your open palm in wide circles all over your scalp.

take a moment Finger-comb the oil through your hair and leave on for 15 minutes as you relax. Gently shampoo with a mild cleanser, towel dry, then let your hair finish drying naturally. If you feel inspired, add ornaments or fresh flowers to it.

show your face some love

Our skin keeps us in constant connection with the textures and energies of our world—so it's no wonder our faces reveal so much about our mental, emotional, and physical status. "When we care for ourselves well, our authentic beauty reflects in our skin," says Ayurvedic aesthetician Evan Healy, founder of the eponymous all-natural skin-care line.

To keep facial skin glowing, Healy recommends giving yourself a wonderfully uncomplicated flaxseed facial. Grind flaxseeds in a coffee grinder, or buy a pre-ground meal like **Bob's Red Mill** (\$3 for 1 pound at bobsredmill.com). It's all good, according to Healy: "A flaxmeal facial paste is pure simplicity and great for every skin type."

The concentrated essential fatty acids in flaxseed moisturize and protect the skin, she explains, and the texture of the hulls stimulates circulation; cleans away dirt, sweat, and excess oils; and sloughs away dead skin cells. Plus, the flaxseed, like all seeds, packs *prana*, or life energy. Releasing prana to your skin energizes and vivifies.

To increase the healing benefits, Healy recommends that you follow your facial with a nourishing turmeric-yogurt mask.

...how

Prepare the nourishing mask by mixing 2 tablespoons plain yogurt with $\frac{1}{3}$ teaspoon honey and a pinch of turmeric powder.

scrub gently At the bathroom sink, splash water onto your face. Then mix a little warm water with 2 teaspoons ground flaxseed to form a light paste. Apply a thin layer to your skin and massage in circles all over your face, spending some extra time gently scrubbing any oily or rough areas.

Rinse well with cool or warm water. (Never use hot water! Hot water stresses delicate facial skin and strips away protective oils.) Pat dry.



relax into the mask Next, spread the yogurt-turmeric mixture evenly over your entire face. Lie down and relax for 10 minutes, taking full, deep breaths and making a conscious effort to release any tension you may be holding in your jaw or forehead.

seal in the goodness Rinse with cool water and pat dry. If you'd like, follow with a spritz of rosewater or other aromatherapy facial spray, and apply

a moisturizer or serum, such as **Evan Healy's Pomegranate Repair Serum** (\$41 for 0.5 ounce at evanhealy.com). Finish by patting your damp face with clean hands to "seal" the good effects of your facial into your skin. Your natural glow is all the makeup you'll want! ❀

Niika Quistgard is an Ayurvedic practitioner and the founder of Rasa Ayurveda Traditional Healing Centre for Women, which was in Kerala, India.

Pampering with Purpose

For a spa experience that's truly rejuvenating, surrender to treatments tailored just for you.

HERE'S MY TRUE CONFESSION: I do not choose to relax. I like to imagine what it would be like to live a life of leisure, lounging by the pool, sipping on cucumber-infused water, biding my time until my next spa appointment. I admire the people who can do it. But in truth, that's not me.

No, I like to work. I like long hours and extreme effort and as much tension as I can possibly build up. I may like to *think* about relaxing, but given the option to actually do it, I'd rather sit in front of my computer for hours on end, spinning away on whatever project I happen to have on hand (they all feel, to me, utterly urgent).

Even my vacations tend to be effort-oriented, if you can call them vacations at all. For one thing, I don't take many, and they're usually short. And for another, they always happen for a reason: to further my career (think story research, job interviews); or to better my body (yoga conferences, detox intensives). Work, in other words, must be getting done.

And so it was, a few years ago, that I found myself at the Chopra Center at Southern California's Omni La Costa Resort & Spa. At the time, I was the editor of a magazine dedicated to the merits of leading a healthy, balanced life. Ironically, I had been working 12-hour days for months. My staff was begging me to take a few days off; my boss kindly, then rather firmly, suggested that I do so.

I decided that at Chopra I could work on my yoga, do a little detox, log some meditation hours, *and* maybe even get a future story out of the mix (*et voilà!*). What's more, I would deepen the typical spa experience by getting treatments based in the ancient Indian healing art of Ayurveda. I would take a little vacation, yes, but I would not waste my time. I'd sign up for a crash course in the Perfect Health program (normally a five-day program; I would do it in three), then get back on the job—informed, rejuvenated, and acceptably refreshed.

DOSHA DIAGNOSIS

Situated in Carlsbad, California, just north of San Diego, Omni La Costa Resort & Spa is breathtaking and luxurious. Surrounded by glowing, clearly affluent families in their matching golf attire, I had never

WHAT'S YOUR SPA TYPE? To get the most out of your spa experience, start by understanding your *dosha* (this is your constitution, according to Ayurvedic tradition). Learn the basics by taking the quiz at yogajournal.com/ayurveda, then try the treatments recommended for your type.

felt so out of place. But when I set foot through the door of the Chopra Center, I knew I was at home. It was slightly darker and a little funkier... still lovely, but with the signs and symbols of yoga all around. There was Ganesha smiling down on me. It would be OK—I could apply effort here; I could have ease.

The yoga, meditation, and cooking classes offered at the center confirmed this hunch. It was during one of these group sessions that I had an "Aha!" moment that would change my attitude toward relaxation—if not forever, at least for the course of this particular vacation. We'd all just had our *dosha* makeup diagnosed and now knew





BEING COVERED IN CLAY IS
GROUNDING—LITERALLY.

what vatas need

TOUCH THAT SOOTHES

"I love to see the *vatas* coming, because they are so much fun," says Natasha Korshak, a onetime director of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness training at the Miraval Resort in Catalina, Arizona. "They're the ones having wild rides! With them, we are always talking about grounding."

When in balance, *vata* types are characterized by high energy, creativity, and an inspiring fluidity. When out of balance, they tend to be nervous, restless, confused, and exhausted. "They are the kind of people who can turn up lots of opportunity; when they're in balance, that's great," says David Greenspan, who's served as the lead Ayurvedic educator at the Chopra Center. "But when they're facing 30 choices and feeling overwhelmed, they start to suffer anxiety, they don't eat well, and they feed on themselves until they're totally imbalanced."

The keys to balancing *vata*, Greenspan says, are warmth, touch, and repe-

tion. This makes gentle massage (think Swedish or *abhyanga*), body wraps, bathing rituals, and all sorts of warming hydrotherapies particularly good choices. Sweet almond, sesame, and safflower oils can balance *vata*, as does the scent of patchouli essential oil.

TREATMENT TO TRY BODY WRAP

A body wrap combines the best of warmth and touch, slathering the body with clay straight from the earth. What could be more grounding? "A good body wrap is an amazing cocoonlike experience," says Korshak. "It makes you feel safe and swaddled and completely centered. Plus, there are some interesting opportunities for self-discovery." The signature Turquoise Wrap at The Boulders Resort and Spa, in Scottsdale, Arizona, begins with a cornmeal scrub, ends with a steam and a full-body honey mask, and in-between enrobes the body in turquoise clay, which is believed by Native Americans to have powerful protective properties.

whether we were an airy, creative, changeable *vata*; a driven, intense, fiery *pitta*; an earthy, loving, steady *kapha*; or some mix of the above. (Most of us are made up of a combination of doshas, with one or possibly two that are predominant. To learn more about your dosha mix, take the online quiz at yogajournal.com/ayurveda.) David Greenspan, a former corporate executive who has served as Chopra's lead educator in Ayurveda and meditation, was giving a talk on the interplay of the doshas within each of us when someone in the class asked, "What dosha type do you see most often at the Chopra Center?"

Greenspan didn't have to think for long. "Vata types," he answered. "Vatas go out of balance very

quickly, and they are the quickest to take action. Generally, when *vatas* go out of whack, they start to feel anxious and overwhelmed, and they want to do something about it. Vata types come here saying they need to slow down so they can think clearly."

The least likely to show up, he said, were *kapha* types. "Imbalanced *kaphas* feel withdrawn and sluggish, and they don't do much of anything unless they really feel inspired," he explained. "It's a rare couch potato who will leap up and say, 'I need to get to the spa!'" Instead, *kaphas* tended to show up because a concerned family member sent them.

And right in the middle were *pittas*. "Pittas come in because they have been burning the candle at both

what pittas need

CALM FOR THE MIND

"We see a lot of stressed-out *pittas* at Exhale in New York," says Robert MacDonald, the spa's director of healing. "They are the people who are ultrasuccessful on Wall Street. They literally thrive on stress. But the body can't tell the difference between stress you love and stress you don't. So you have to work to offset the impact."

Pittas have a lot of stamina, says Greenspan, which is both good and bad. They can push themselves right up to the point of collapse. "They need to learn cooling techniques so they don't scorch the earth around them—so they can be compassionate and loving instead of so pointed and direct," he says. The greatest cooling tool in the arsenal? Meditation.

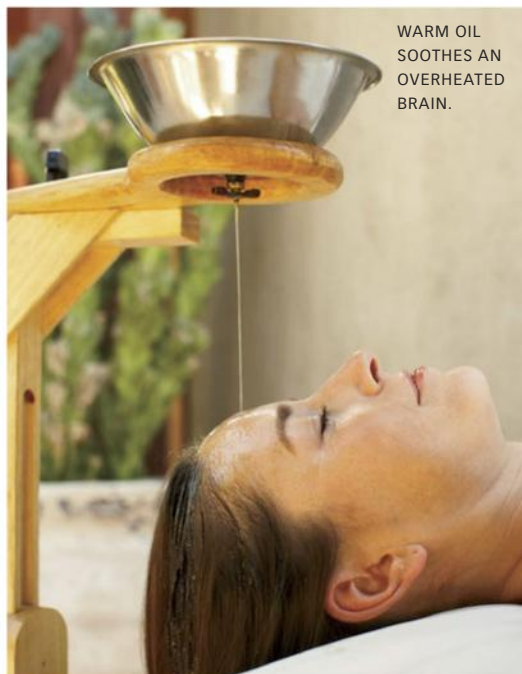
"Meditation soothes and calms; it allows you to have stillness and silence instead of reactive responses," Greenspan says. "It can allow a pitta to live life with great grace and ease. It can create a huge shift."

At the spa, good choices include treatments aimed

ends—they've been running at such a high level of execution that they are literally fried," Greenspan said. "They are working all the time, barking at people, causing and getting headaches. They're not taking any time off for anything. They end up getting so overheated everyone around them gets burned. I call it scorching the village."

CHILLING OUT

Huh. I myself am a pitta type, and something about this scenario sounded... a bit



WARM OIL SOOTHES AN OVERHEATED BRAIN.

at healing (pittas benefit enormously from creating the intention to heal) and those that address heat-related complaints. Cool-water therapies are good choices, as are Reiki and other gentle forms of energy work, massages, and facials. Choose avocado or coconut oils for a massage, and work with essential oils of sandalwood, jasmine, or rose.

TREATMENT TO TRY SHIRODHARA

Shirodhara is the classical soothing Ayurvedic treatment in which a continuous stream of therapeutic oil is applied to the head. It's the perfect antidote to the pitta

tendency to think too much—it cools down an overheated head quickly. As a bonus, shirodhara also brings down excess vata, thereby reducing any winds that might be fanning your flames. ("If you have a fire going and you add a lot of wind, suddenly it's a bonfire," Greenspan explains. "You often need to address vata *and* pitta.") If you're angry, irritable, or agitated, indulge in a shirodhara treatment and say goodbye to those little puffs of smoke that have been blowing out of your ears.

familiar. My ears pricked up as he outlined the cure: "Pittas need to be soothed; they are inflamed. You can only get so inflamed before you incinerate yourself. You're like an engine running, running, running. You have to shut off so you can cool down."

I know the truth when I hear it. I was a pitta out of control. I needed to do what people come to spas to do: let go, unwind, and turn myself over to someone else to manage for a little while. Create space. Surrender. See what would happen.

And I did. For my two remaining days, I stopped striving and angling for control. I let the Chopra Center recommend my treatments and enjoyed a balancing *shirodhara* treatment, a soothing *abhyanga* massage, and a completely blissful sound-therapy/massage hybrid treatment called Gandharva, with glorious crystal singing bowls—something I would have never selected for myself (too frivolous).

I had the great fortune to meet with David Simon, the late neurologist who was the medical director, CEO, and co-founder of the Chopra Center. He recommended that I simply create some space in my schedule every day—five-minute "buffer zones" before and after each of my many meetings and endless tasks. That would, he said, go a long way toward creating balance and helping me tap into my own compassionate heart.

For the next two days, I ate well; I drank tea. Between spa appointments, I did—amazingly—nothing. I sat by the pool. I sipped cucumber water. My head began to clear. I felt a little better. But though I was relinquishing control, I was still soaking up information. The best mind-body spas send you home with the tools you need to balance your life *outside* their rarified walls. I was learning what I needed to know about how to eat, sleep, exercise, and keep a cool head even as I kept a warm heart.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

And that, says Robert MacDonald, an acupuncturist and massage therapist who is director of healing for the Exhale Mind Body Spa (with facilities in New York City and other locations around the world), is what makes a visit to the spa transformational. "When you embrace therapies like yoga or acupuncture or even bodywork, you're really reaching for tools that can elevate you to a higher level of functionality," he says. "If you go off to a spa and you just have treatments and don't learn anything, it's like going on the Atkins diet. It's great when you're using it, but when you get back to your regular life, it all falls apart. But a good spa is about sustainable transformation."

For Seane Corn, an occasional spa visit is part of her ongoing pitta-management

plan. Corn is a busy yoga instructor, social activist, workshop coordinator, creator of DVDs and audio courses, and co-creator of the nonprofit Off the Mat, Into the World. “I’m a Type A personality, and my pattern is go-go-go-go, crash,” she explains. “When I go to the spa, there’s a reason for it—I need to be in an environment geared to relaxation, feeling, and introspection. It allows me space to let go and receive.”

An occasional spa excursion fits right in with Corn’s yoga. “I think that anything that helps bring you back into the present is a valid form of practice,” she says. “It is a luxury and a privilege—and optional—don’t get me wrong. A \$95 herbal wrap is not going to get you any closer to God. But we live in a culture of stress, and you should do everything you can to bring yourself into alignment.”

PROFOUND PEACE

For most of us, that means slowing down. We are overscheduled multitaskers, addicted to doing and not so big on just *being*. Natasha Korshak was at one point the director of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness training at the storied Miraval Resort in Catalina, Arizona. “We see all types here at Miraval, but I think of it as a playground for pittas,” she says. “Many of our guests have high-level positions and are very driven. They come here and are ambitious with their agenda. I encourage them to slow down, to decide from moment to moment what they want to do. To think deeply about what they need now and going forward. The message at Miraval is: This is fun, but we’re asking you to be present for every moment of it.”

Indeed, for overtaxed Americans—particularly those who don’t pursue a daily yoga or meditation practice—a trip to the spa can be a spiritual experience, says Jonathan Ellerby, former spiritual programs director at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Arizona. “There is so much that stands between us and our spiritual selves—our minds, habits, disappointments, kids, jobs, taxes,” he says. “People come here and they slow down and nurture themselves, sometimes for the first time ever. They may be having a shirodhara treatment or a massage and

what kaphas need

MOVES THAT ENERGIZE

A balanced *kapha* is a beautiful thing: strong, loving, kind, earthy, grounded. “The constitutions all have their upside and their downside,” says Jonathan Ellerby, former spiritual programs director at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Arizona. “Someone may be a kapha, and it may help them to be steady and patient at work. But perhaps in a relationship where there is a crisis, they’re absent, maybe sleeping a lot.”

The kapha dosha is composed of earth and water, which makes it solid, yes, but also slow. “When a kapha goes out of balance, the person becomes very sluggish and the imbalance is much deeper than with vata or pitta,” explains Greenspan. “When kaphas are overwhelmed, they often just shut down. You have to break that cycle of inertia. The way you do that is by invigorating the body through yoga and diet and treatments that bring blood to the skin and get the body moving.”

Kapha types who have been on the couch for a while should get moving



A THAI YOGA MASSAGE INVIGORATES GENTLY.

gradually. “Kaphas need stimulation, but you have to go gently or they’ll get scared off,” says Korshak. “You have to help them see the benefit of more-vigorous efforts.” The challenge for out-of-balance kaphas? Weight loss.

To invigorate stagnant kapha, select body scrubs, deep massage such as Rolfing, lymphatic drainage, detox facials, *vishesh* (an Ayurvedic deep-tissue friction massage), or *udvartna* (an Ayurvedic treatment in which an herbal paste is used to draw out excess fluids and toxins). Dry-heat saunas and any kind of moving massage therapy are also helpful. Choose

safflower or sesame oils for massage, and add aromatic frankincense, peppermint, or rosemary.

TREATMENT TO TRY THAI MASSAGE

The perfect marriage of movement and massage, Thai massage invigorates stagnant kapha types without overwhelming them. A blend of assisted stretching and acupressure treatment, it has often been described as passive yoga. The therapist uses his or her weight to take muscles and joints through a wide range of motion. It’s both energizing and relaxing—and moreover, it’s fun.

find that the mind relaxes and something else emerges. They can connect to a profound sense of peace, open-mindedness, and present-moment awareness. They say, ‘How come I couldn’t do this on my own?’ I say, ‘How come you thought you could?’ We all need support sometimes.”

And so I took a deep breath. I got some perspective, and I realized I was angry all the time. And then, I wasn’t. I began to see how my life could be a little bit sweeter for me and for everyone else

around me if only I’d chill out just a little. I would move forward with a commitment to take better care of myself, knowing that my life could be not only happier and healthier, but also more efficient and productive! And suddenly—from my positively pitta perspective—an occasional trip to the spa began to seem very worthwhile indeed. ❀

Hillari Dowdle, former editor of Yoga Journal, is a freelance writer in Knoxville, Tennessee.

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Your Best Diet

A nourishing Ayurvedic regimen
naturally guides you to the body
weight that's right for you.

WHILE LIVING IN an ashram in Northern India years ago, I loved playing auntie to two young girls—Chaya and Lakshmi—from a nearby village. When Lakshmi neared puberty, she started to gain weight. As she grew softer and wider, her mother continued her usual mealtime practice of putting balls of rice and lentils into Lakshmi's mouth, well past the point of satiety. The family became more and more delighted, parading her ahead of them as they walked to temple, showing off their daughter's fleshly abundance. "Look how round and healthy she is," they'd say. "She's going to catch quite a husband!"

Meanwhile, back in California, the women in my own extended family were worried about a distant cousin—a beautiful, creative girl who happened to be a little chubby in her elementary-school years. "We've *got* to help her control her weight," they'd whisper with desperation. "We don't want her to feel bad about herself for being heavy."

Despite their good intentions, both families showed more commitment to cultural norms than to understanding the needs of their girls' bodies. A person's perfect weight can't be sized up by the eye or measured by a scale. According to the principles of Ayurveda, the ancient Indian science of health, everyone has an ideal weight that's unique to their *prakriti*, or constitutional nature, made up of the three life energies, or *doshas*: *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*.

Because your ideal weight is unique, it can't be compared with your sister's, your neighbor's, your

VATA-CALMING BUTTERNUT
SQUASH AND SWEET POTATO
SOUP (RECIPE ON PAGE 107).

self-care

best friend's, or your own five years ago. Your ideal weight is affected by your age, the season, the climate, and—if you're a woman—your menstrual stage. The right weight has nothing to do with numbers. Instead, it's a reflection of feeling and being truly healthy—being comfortable and stable in body and mind, and having the strength and endurance to fully engage in the demands of everyday life.

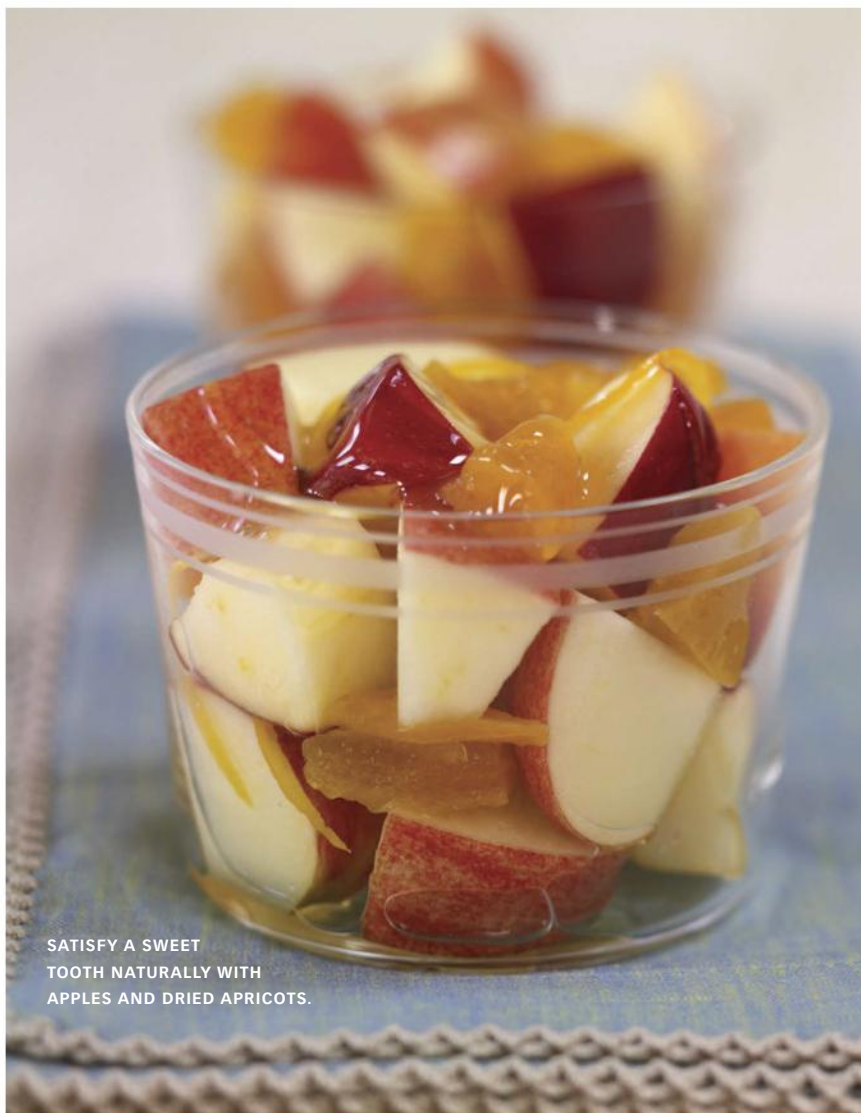
Knowing your dominant dosha can help you establish healthful eating habits and dietary choices. (Take our survey designed to reveal your dosha at yogajournal.com/ayurveda.) Over time, by living and eating according to your dominant dosha, you'll settle into the best weight for you—and only you.

VATA FIND THE RHYTHM

Vata-dominant people have slight or deerlike builds. When out of balance, they might tend toward irregular digestion, usually losing weight when stressed. If vata dominates your constitution, you can become imbalanced after emotional trauma, and your weight may yo-yo up and down as your system attempts to insulate, ground, and protect itself.

You'll find balance in your weight and life by following a rhythm: eating three meals a day at regular times, with the main meal of the day around noon, when digestion is strongest. Warm, moist, and heavier foods with sweet, sour, or salty tastes will nourish tissues, emotions, and overall body weight. Foods that are bitter, pungent, or astringent should be avoided. Warming spices like cumin, garlic, or cinnamon support a stable *agni* (digestive fire, or metabolism).

You might crave sweets, caffeine, or other substances that affect the nervous system—especially if life has you running in rapid, unpredictable circles. Instead of turning to food stimulants, try developing faith through a devotional or spiritual practice to help you disengage from anxious, repetitive thinking. Warm oil, applied externally with an all-over self-massage, can calm tense or hypersensitive digestion and bring you back toward a comfortable, stable, balanced body weight and muscle tone.



SATISFY A SWEET
TOOTH NATURALLY WITH
APPLES AND DRIED APRICOTS.

PITTA GO FRESH AND LIGHT

The pitta dosha is associated with fire energy. If you're pitta dominant and live in balance, you'll most likely sport a medium, equine, well-proportioned body. Associated with fire energy, the pitta dosha governs digestion and transformation in the body and mind.

With a propensity for ambition and hyperfocus, you might keep your nose to the grindstone far past lunch, honing your mental aim with acidic coffee and attempting to quell hunger with whatever is most easily available. Sadly, fast food usually means junk food. The salty, fatty processed ingredients, artificial flavors, and preservatives can aggravate acid production, eventually weakening the liver, gallbladder, and small intestine.

Kapha-Calming Apple Dessert

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

- 1 teaspoon dried orange peel,
soaked overnight in 1 teaspoon
boiled water
- 4 apples, washed and chopped into
½-inch pieces
- ⅓ cup dried apricots, chopped
- Sprinkle of ground cloves
- Drizzle of honey

- 1 Mix all of the ingredients in a large bowl.
- 2 Let sit at room temperature for an hour, and then enjoy.

When you do sit down to enjoy a meal, you're likely to indulge a craving. Strikingly sour and hot tastes that deliver sharp stimulation—like red wine, garlic, chilies, and vinegary pickles—just add intensity to the fire. These foods don't translate directly into weight gain, but according to Ayurvedic thought, they do lead to intestinal inflammation, which creates circulatory congestion, or fluid retention, a precursor to obesity.

To eat for balance, you must take time for regular meals, making lunch the biggest meal of the day, as digestion is at its peak at midday. A pitta metabolism is naturally strong with high agni, which demands fuel; if the digestive fire isn't fed regularly, it overheats. Acids and enzymes then concentrate, disrupting normal digestion and contributing to the formation of *ama*, the toxic byproduct of a faulty digestive process that Ayurvedic theory suggests can clog various bodily channels and cause weight gain.

Fresh, light fruits, veggies, and grains with bitter, sweet, and astringent tastes (like cucumbers, green beans, apples, quinoa, and greens) calm the dosha's overheated passion and ease digestion.

KAPHA SAVOR THE BITTERSWEET

Kapha-dominant types tend to have stockier builds and round faces. You fall out of balance slowly and are most likely to gain weight over time and hold on to it. A slide into extra weight might begin with long hours at a sedentary job. Add a few slices of birthday cake, a couple of rainy weekends sleeping in, a movie instead of yoga, and a few servings of rich comfort food, and extra pounds appear.

If kapha dominates your prakriti, you'll find a healthy weight when you eat smaller meals of fresh raw and light foods with bitter, astringent, and pungent tastes. Eating your main meal around noon is especially good for balancing digestion in kapha-dominant prakritis.

Dessert, unfortunately, is not on the menu. The sweet taste just creates an imbalance of kapha energy that can lead to weight gain. Instead, try an after-meal cup of green tea with dry ginger to boost digestion and metabolism and reduce

dependence on heavy, cloying sweets. However, dried fruit and treats sweetened with the herb stevia can bring kapha energy back into balance. Fresh berries, apricots, and apples are great choices, too.

While your natural sense of stability can become stagnation that resists even healthy change, once you have made a commitment, your slow and steady nature will keep you on a sure path until you reach your goal for a naturally balanced and healthy body weight.

SIMPLY SATISFIED

How will you know when you've hit the right weight? The Caraka Samhita, a classic Ayurvedic text, says: "The senses are fulfilled; hunger and thirst are assuaged; standing, sitting, lying down, walking, breathing, talking, and laughing are effortless; food is digested easily by evening or morning."

Forget cultural expectations—if you nourish yourself in a way that brings you health and joy, your body will follow your lead to your perfect, balanced weight. ❖

Niika Zyistgard directed a women's Ayurvedic clinic in Kerala, India (rasaayurveda.com).

Pitta-Calming Sauté

MAKES 1 SERVING

For a light but satisfying dinner, serve over cooked quinoa and rice.

- 1 tablespoon ghee
- 1 small head of broccoli, florets roughly cut
- 1 teaspoon fresh ginger, grated
- 2 tablespoons scallions, chopped

- 1 Heat ghee in a sauté pan over medium heat.
- 2 Add the broccoli and sauté until just cooked, about 5 to 8 minutes.
- 3 Sprinkle ginger and scallions over broccoli, and serve.

● All recipes by Niika Zyistgard.

Vata-Calming Soup

MAKES 3 SERVINGS

This soothing soup is simple to make and beautiful to behold (pictured on page 104).

- 2 tablespoons ghee
- 1 medium butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch chunks
- 1 medium sweet potato or 2 large carrots, peeled and chopped
- 1 large onion, loosely diced
- 2 large cloves garlic, smashed
- 1-inch knob of fresh ginger, washed and finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon turmeric
- 3 cups broth or water
- 1 cup coconut milk or half-and-half
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- Freshly minced parsley to garnish

- 1 Melt 1 tablespoon ghee over medium-high heat in a large, deep sauté pan.
- 2 Add squash, sweet potato, and then onion. Sauté, stirring very little at first, then more frequently, for 7 to 8 minutes or until all the ingredients turn golden brown.
- 3 Reduce the heat to low and add garlic. Continue cooking until the vegetables are a rich caramel color, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat.
- 4 In separate soup pot, add remaining tbs ghee, ginger, and remaining spices save salt and pepper. Sauté until fragrant.
- 5 Add broth and vegetables to soup pot. Bring to a low boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 10 minutes, partially covered, until the squash is tender.
- 6 Purée in a blender until smooth.
- 7 Return the mixture to the soup pot. Pour in enough coconut milk so that the soup flows easily but has a thick and hearty consistency. Add salt and pepper to taste. Heat through and serve, garnished with parsley.

Altogether Now

You've learned the basics. Now, how do you turn them into a practice? Here's one way to do it: an all-purpose routine for everyone.



Start with three to six rounds of **Sun Salutations** (page 8), starting slow, then building up heat and speed. Let your breath be your guide as you move—you can depend on it to set the proper pace for you. During your last round, pause for a minute

or two in **Downward-Facing Dog** (page 14). Let yourself wriggle in the pose, shaking off stress and finding your proper alignment. Then do the same in **Upward-Facing Dog** (page 20)—allowing gravity to open your heart. At the end of your session, stand still, honoring your effort.

Next, drop into **Chair Pose** (Utkatasana) for 5 to 10 breaths (page 24). This is a strengthening and warming pose when done early in a practice, and a good gauge of how you are really feeling today. If you're strong, go for it! If you're feeling fragile, take it easy on yourself.

Next, take **Triangle Pose** (page 40)—practicing first on one side, then the other. Allow the pose to open the sides of the body, and feel the grounding through your feet. Stay on each side for 10 to 20 breaths.

Then drop one knee to 90 degrees into **Warrior II** (page 46). Feel the openness in the hips as you keep them square to the sides of the mat. Arms up, looking forward, feeling strong and able. Do both sides, holding for 5 to 10 breaths.



Shorten your stance, rotate your hips forward, and come into **Warrior I**. As the article reminds us on page 31, there is no one "right" way to do this (or any other) pose, but aim to keep your chest square to the front, raising your arms overhead and feeling the delicious stretch from the back leg through the torso.

Now is the time for a balancing posture; choose any from the article "Plumb Perfect" on page 34. We think that **Tree Pose** is an especially apt posture for feeling the openness and stability you've created with your standing poses.



Backbends come next in a logical sequence; embrace them with compassion, as explained on page 52. Concentrate on one, or do all three—Locust Pose, Bridge Pose, and Chair Pose. If you do the latter, notice the difference in your body as you've opened and readied it more with practice. Let the focus be on the backbend.

An **abdominal strengthener** will benefit every pose in your practice through increased core strength. We offer two of our favorites—leg lifts, on page 56, and Boat Pose, on page 60. Do one, or both.

Inversions are optional, and please learn them from a trusted teacher before you try them on your own. But Supported Headstand and Supported Shoulderstand would come next. Follow Aadil Palkhivala's advice (page 64) and don't do them until you're truly ready.

Come into **Downward Dog**. Swing one foot forward into **Pigeon Pose** (page 70). Play with bending forward and leaning back in this pose. Stay for 10 breaths or so. Next, lie on your back, pull up a leg, and take a simple **Reclining Twist** (page

74). Make it a practice of total ease and release. Do one side, then the other. Luxuriate in the stretch for as long as you like.

Sit up straight, reach for your toes, and take **Seated Forward Bend**, which is shown on page 78. Here is where you bring your attention from the external world to the internal one. Feel the benefits of your practice in body *and* soul.


Finally, it's time for yoga's ultimate reward: **Corpse Pose**, on page 83. Give up all effort now, letting the earth support you. Breathe deeply and steadily, and know that this is all you need do right now. Aim to stay for at least 10 minutes. When you're done, come out of the posture by sitting up slowly. Take a moment to integrate all the bits and pieces of your practice.

Now's the time to **meditate**, if you feel so inclined. Keep



it simple with any one of Janice Gates's easy practices, found on page 86. Otherwise, carry the attention and care

you've built with your practice into your day. ❀



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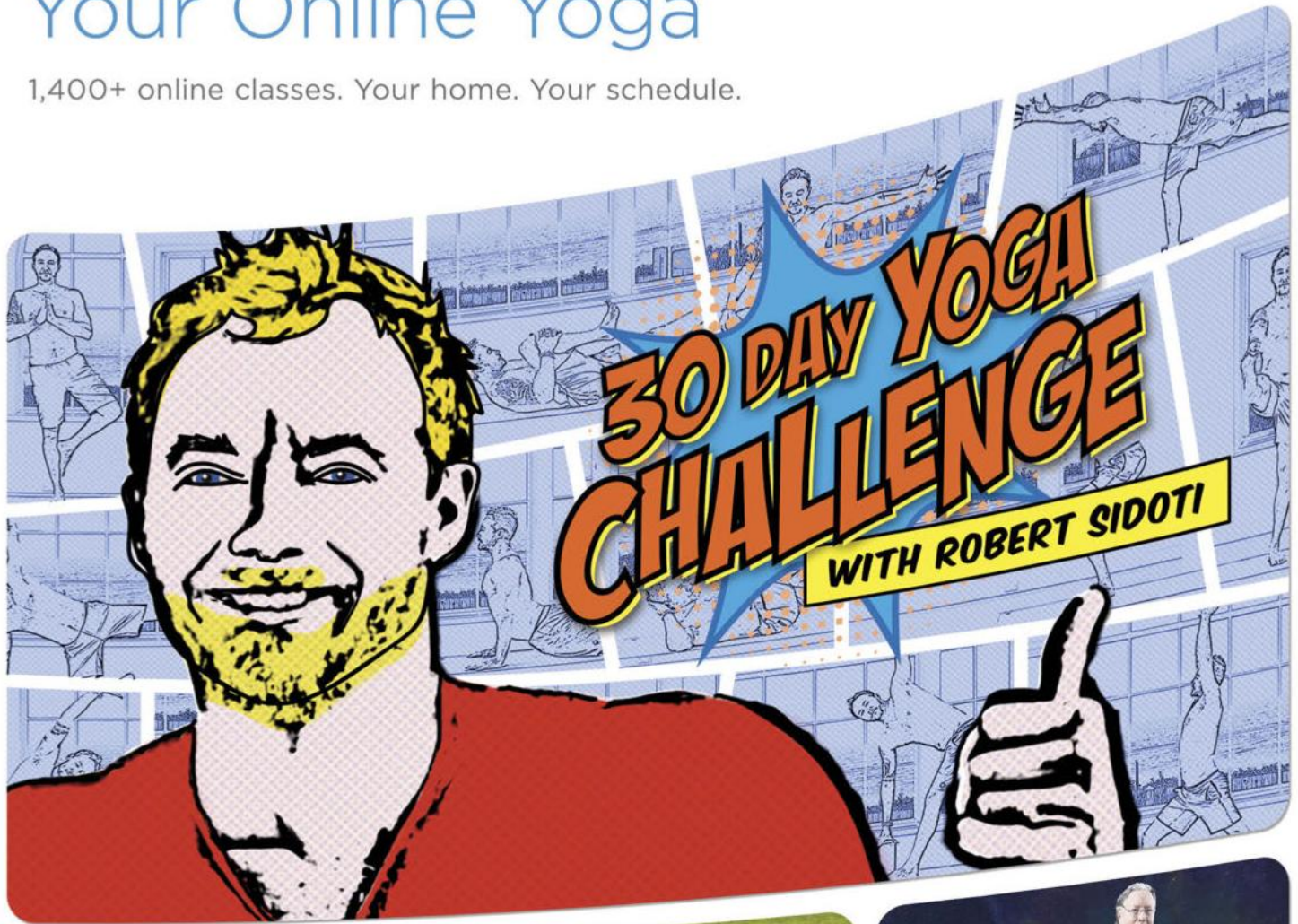
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