

ARE YOU PRACTICING EFFECTIVELY?



5 PRINCIPLES FOR A PROPER HATHA YOGA PRACTICE



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PRACTICING EFFECTIVELY:
GUIDELINES FOR A
HOLISTIC HATHA
YOGA PRACTICE

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARATION

If you want to build a house that lasts for a lifetime, you first need to pour a strong foundation. The most beautiful and artfully crafted castle cannot last on a foundation of sand. Likewise, a yoga asana practice needs a strong foundation. This foundation ensures benefits that exceed mere physical toning and bring you into realms of true holistic well-being. The benefits of a practice built on a foundation of principles and discipline are many. This is true on the physical, mental, and spiritual levels. A holistic asana practice is a balanced practice because it creates harmony between the physical, mental, and energy bodies. A balanced practice should always be comprised of several key elements, and benefits greatly from a conducive setting.

Establishing a conducive environment

SETTING THE ENVIRONMENT

A favorable environment plays an important role. A calm, undisturbed environment deepens the effect of asanas, pranayama, and meditation.

- **Time:** Traditionally asanas were practiced either at dawn (brahmamuhurta) or dusk (sandhya), when the rhythms of life are calm and gentle and temperatures are mild. Though dawn and dusk are ideal, one can practice whenever when one is not tired or sleepy, as long as it is not within 2 hours after a main meal.
- **Space:** The space used for asana practice is also of great importance. You should practice in an open, distraction-free, uncluttered space. There should be enough space around the mat and above your head. The space should be well lit and well ventilated.

- **Temperature:** Temperature affects your body as well as the mind. If it is too cold, the muscles do not become warmed up properly. They may contract and refuse to relax, and the mind might become dull and lazy. Pushing your body in this condition greatly increases the chances of injury or overload. Conversely, too much heat loosens up the muscles, and your body easily tends to push beyond its limits and to overstretch. The nervous system shifts into sympathetic mode as the heart beat increases. Ideally the temperature of the room should be mild—neither too hot nor too cold. You should feel comfortable wearing a t-shirt, without requiring a fan or a sweater. This ensures a proper temperature for the nervous system to relax into the rest-and-regenerate mode.
- **Clothing:** Traditionally asanas have been practiced wearing only a kaupinam, a rectangular strip of linen or cotton tied around hips and genitals. Ideally one should wear clothes made up of natural fabrics, to let the skin breathe and perspire freely. Most important is that you feel comfortable and relaxed in whichever attire you chose to practice and that you do not wear certain clothes to impress or to try to fit in. The practice of asanas should be a practice with mindful attention and love toward yourself. Being too focused on how you look will keep your practice in the realms of the mundane and superficial, rather than leading you toward inner peace and self-acceptance.

PHYSICAL STATE

Asanas should not be practiced while you are sick or suffering acutely from severe disease or while you are fatigued. Practicing asanas with fatigue can lead to misuse of muscles and to injury. An adapted, gentle form of asanas can be, though, truly beneficial if you are recovering or suffering from chronic diseases or fatigue. Asanas should be practiced only after emptying the bowels and on an empty stomach. If the bowels are carrying feces, then asana practice may toxify your body due to “over-cooking” the feces. Traditionally, bowel-cleansing techniques such as basti or enema are performed before asana practice.

MENTAL STATE

According to Maharishi Patanjali, asanas should be performed with the mind free from desire, anxiety, anger, or fear. Practicing asanas when the mind is unstable, worried, anxious, or upset may cause injury or even more agitation. For a fruitful practice, you should train your mind to let go of any emotions and thoughts as you step onto your mat. Bring the awareness to your body and breath and postpone any thoughts to after your practice. By the end of the practice some of the negative emotions might have lifted already. You might have a new perspective on the same situation, without having spent your mental energy worrying or bickering. Keeping your mind set tightly on the goal of the practice will help to keep your mind stable. Important, however, is that the goal should be free from competition, approval, or display.

Bend but do not break — Avoiding injuries

Contrary to the common belief that yoga is safe, many injuries may occur during asana classes or practices. Sometimes injuries may happen due to improper guidance. At other times they may be due to the mistakes of the practitioner. It is exciting for teachers and students to see results and development. It is of paramount importance, though, to remember that our practice will enrich us holistically only if we refrain from putting our ego into the equation. As soon as the ego is there, measuring our yoga and our students' yoga by certain predefined parameters, our chance of actually doing more harm than benefit increases tremendously. This does not mean that we should always remain within our comfort zone, that we should not try to grow within our practice. It means that it should be done understanding the following six principles. These six principles, kept in mind at all times provide a foundation for safe, healthy, and rewarding asana practice.

NO TWO PEOPLE ARE ALIKE – THE PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Everyone evolves according to his or her own nature. Because each body and mind is unique, each person's natural physical and mental response to yoga practice is different. It is natural that your motivation, coordination, endurance level, physical state, mental state, and body type will influence your yoga practice. No two people will display exactly the same alignment in an asana. Each will assume the unique alignment that is natural for him or her. The natural duration of the hold will also vary from person to person. Thus, there is no single ideal alignment and duration of an asana that will be natural and most beneficial to everyone.

EXPAND YOUR COMFORT ZONE – THE PRINCIPLE OF OVERLOAD AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PROGRESSION

The physical condition of your body improves with optimal overload. Therefore you need to apply a greater-than-normal stress to the body in order to improve. This overload can be applied through increasing the duration of the pose or increasing the complexity of the asana. For example if you have been holding Shoulderstand for 30 seconds for 2 months without increasing the duration or complexity, your

body will become accustomed to the posture and the effect on the body will start to decrease.

On the other side, if the overload is increased too much or too quickly, there is a greater chance for injury and a reduced chance of improvement. There is an optimal and unique level of overload for each person. You must therefore apply overload carefully and progressively. If you do not follow this principle, the possibility of overtraining and subsequent injury is high. You must decide on the progression of overload according to your physical condition, endurance, frequency, and motivation. Overload is effective only when your body experiences a challenge but still retains the ability to perform the movements with control and without any errors.

IT DOES NOT GET EASIER, YOU JUST GET BETTER – THE PRINCIPLE OF ADAPTATION AND THE PRINCIPLE OF USE/DISUSE

Your body adapts to the increased time or complexity of an asana in a predictable physiological manner. By repeating the asana over and over again, your body adapts to the overload. As you become comfortable with your yoga practice, you will need to vary the program to stay aligned with the principle of overload. This way, you will continue to improve in strength, flexibility, balance, and stability. This principle also explains how by repetition even complex asanas will become easier as your body gradually adapts. This explains why, while learning Crow Pose you may fall many times each day, and then suddenly be able to hold the pose effortlessly.

“Use it or lose it” is a common expression. It suggests that your body does not stay in one condition: it either improves or worsens. Whenever you abandon asana practice, any gains you have made in strength, flexibility, balance, and endurance will diminish. So you must adjust the overload according to your use and disuse of your body. So after having taken a break from regular practice, once you commence again, you also need to dial down the level a little, and then build up again.

THE MAGIC INGREDIENT – THE PRINCIPLE OF REST

The effect of your practice takes place after your practice. Therefore rest is vital. Do not underestimate its importance. With rest you give your body a break and the chance to integrate, adapt, repair, and grow. Like your regular practice of any skill, your regular yoga asana practice trains your body to improve your performance and to increase the loading capacity of your body. With your regular Hatha Yoga practice your entire body grows stronger and more coordinated. When tissue rests after training, it repairs itself to be stronger than before. If you fail to rest enough, your tissues will weaken and injuries are likely to develop. How often your body needs to rest depends on your body type, health, and form of practice. So also the ideal amount of rest varies from person to person.

THE FIVE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS

There are five important ingredients for a safe, fulfilling, and holistic asana practice according to the principles of Hatha Yoga. These five ingredients, or steps are

1. relaxation;
2. conscious breathing;
3. proper warm-up;
4. steady, comfortable poses; and
5. proper sequencing of asanas.

Each practice or class starts with a short, initial relaxation. Lying down in Corpse Pose, focus on your breath and consciously relax each part of your body. Then, before starting with any asanas, you first warm up your respiratory system and tune your mind and intention into the present moment. You can start the class or practice with two breathing exercises, Kapalabhati (for activating the sympathetic nervous system) and Anulom Vilom (for activating the parasympathetic nervous system). After warming up your respiratory system, proceed to warming up your spine, joints, and entire body. Only then begin your practice of asanas. An ideal warming-up exercise is the Sun Salutation.

Your practice of asanas that follows your warm-up aims for balance on two levels: a muscular level (by alternating forward and backward bends) and an internal level (by sequencing your asanas from the Crown Chakra on down). Your final period of relaxation after the practice gives your body and mind time to bathe in the effects of your practice and rejuvenate.

Step 1: Relaxing

No yoga practice is complete without sufficient relaxation. You should practice relaxation before beginning your session, while performing each asana, between asanas, and at the end of your session.

Relax before your practice: Your practice starts with initial relaxation. Lying down in Corpse Pose for 5 minutes prior to starting helps bring your focus to your body and breathing. It also neutralizes body temperature, blood pressure, and respiration rate. Further, it assists your body and mind to attune and prepare for the upcoming practice.

Relax throughout your practice: As stated in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, a yoga posture should be steady and comfortable (*sthira sukham asanam*). Not only should your body be relaxed, but your mind as well. Maintaining a relaxed state of mind allows your body to become more flexible, supple, and light. This helps you find and gradually expand your comfort zone and perform any asana with much more ease and control.

Relax in between each posture: Relaxation poses are practiced for 30 to 60 seconds in between sets of asanas. The main purpose of regular relaxation between poses is to prevent your body from jump starting the sympathetic nervous system. Usually it is sufficient to fit in a relaxation pose after every two to four asanas. However, after a particular challenging asana or exercises, extra relaxation moments are recommended.

Relax after your practice: A final relaxation at the end of your practice enables your body and mind to fully integrate the changes that have taken place during the practice. When tissues rest after training, they repair and heal and become stronger.

RELAXATION POSE

SHAVASANA

CORPSE POSE

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Lie on your back, with your legs straight and relaxed, feet mat-width apart, toes relaxed and dropped outwards.

Arms are apart at a 40-degree angle from your body, with palms facing upward.

Hands and fingers are relaxed.

Eyes are closed.

Your entire body is completely relaxed and heavy on the floor.

The mind is focused on breathing.



WHEN TO DO

- for initial and final relaxation
- after breathing exercises
- after Sun Salutation
- in between or after supine asanas

VARIATION

SUPTA BADDHA KONASANA SLEEPING BOUND ANGLE POSE

Lie on your back and bring the soles of your feet together, knees dropping towards the floor. Arms are apart at a 40-degree angle from your body, with palms facing upward. Hands and fingers are relaxed and eyes are closed. Take easy abdominal breaths, letting your body sink into the floor. (If you feel strain in your groin area or knees, you can place bolsters or cushions below your knees.)



RELAXATION POSE

SHASHANKASANA (AKA BALASANA)

CHILD'S POSE

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Sit on your knees, with your hips resting on your heels.

Bend forward and place your forehead on the floor while keeping your hips on your heels. (If your hips are lifting off from the heels, open your knees apart. If your hips are still not resting, make two fists and place them one atop the other, then rest your forehead on your topmost fist. You can also support your hips with a cushion.)

Your arms are resting on the floor, alongside your body.

Let your shoulders relax toward the floor.



Focus on easy, abdominal breathing.

WHEN TO DO

- before and after inversions
- in between seated asanas
- after extensive back bends
- in between hand balances

CONTRAINDICATIONS & CAUTIONS

If you suffer from hypertension you are advised to avoid Child's Pose. In between seated asanas and after back-bending you can do a seated variation of Child's Pose, where you sit on your buttocks and hug your knees to the chest, feet resting on the floor. Allow your spine to round and rest your forehead on the top of your knees.

If you have very low blood pressure you can do Child's Pose, but make sure to come up slowly to avoid becoming dizzy.

VARIATION

KHAGASANA

HARE POSE

Start seated on your knees, with your hips on your heels. Open your knees shoulder or mat-width apart, keeping the big toes together. Walk your hands forward as you bend your torso forward. Keep your hips towards your heels and bring your forehead to the floor. For an extra stretch in your middle and upper back, you can also place your chin on the floor. Keep a gentle activation between your hands reaching forward and your hips sinking toward your heels and breathe evenly.



RELAXATION POSE

MAKARASANA

CROCODILE POSE

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Lie down on your stomach.

Make a cushion with your hands and place one cheek on top. (If your shoulder feels tight in this position, you can also keep your arms along your body, palms facing up and one cheek resting on the floor.)

Big toes of both feet are touching, heels are dropped outwards. Hips are relaxed.

Focus on breathing into your stomach and lower-back.



WHEN TO DO

- in between prone back-bending asanas
- during initial or final relaxation as an alternative to Corpse Pose

VARIATION

SASHTANG PRANAM ASANA

PRONE PRAYER POSE

Lie down on your stomach, with your feet hip or shoulder-width apart. Place your forehead on the floor and bring your hands in Prayer Position above you on the floor. Close your eyes and breathe evenly.



Step 2: Right breathing

Regular and conscious breathing is an important factor in the holistic practice of asanas. Breathing should be calm and effortless, which helps your body to stay in the parasympathetic zone. During the practice of asanas, the focus should be on diaphragmatic breathing, such as abdominal breath or full yogic breath. Starting the practice with some conscious breathing and breathing exercises helps to establish the mode of abdominal breathing and helps maintain that breathing pattern for the duration of the entire practice.

During most of the asanas and exercises in Hatha Yoga we maintain abdominal breathing. This is the most natural and effortless way of breathing. During some asanas in which the chest is expanded, such as Extended Cobra Pose, Cow Face Pose, or Camel Pose to name a few, you can also practice full yogic breath, which is deep diaphragm breathing aiming to use the full lung capacity. Practicing full yogic breath in chest openers provides a gentle workout for the lungs while at the same time deepening the pose.

While you strive to hold the poses, you should avoid holding your breath. It is helpful to inhale with all the extensions and exhale with all the flexions. Breathing in with extensions helps stretch your intercostals and abdominal muscles while lengthening your body. Breathing out with flexions helps relax your intercostal muscles while engaging your core and abdomen and bending your body forward.

Before you start your asana practice, warm up your musculoskeletal system with Sun Salutations and some alternative exercises. Before that, warm up your respiratory system with two breathing exercises: Kapalabhati and Anulom Vilom.

BREATHING EXERCISE

KAPALBHATI

SKULL-SHINING BREATH

In Sanskrit kapal means “skull” and bhati means “shining.” Together they mean “shining skull.” Kapalabhati is considered to be so cleansing to the entire system that, when practiced on a regular basis, the face shines with good health and radiance. In fact, traditionally Kapalabhati is one of the six internal cleansing exercises (shat kriyas) rather than a form of pranayama.

Even though it is traditionally classified as a cleansing exercise, Kapalabhati is an excellent breathing exercise to warm up the respiratory system and internally warm up your body in preparation for the following physical practice. It is an easier version of the pranayama Bhastrika and suitable for most levels of experience and fitness.

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Sit in a cross-legged position, with your spine straight and erect. Take an abdominal breath in to prepare for pumping.

Contract your abdominal muscles to forcefully exhale from the nose.

Relax your abdominal muscles naturally, for inhalation. Be cautious not to inhale actively, but instead release your abdomen and allow the air to be sucked in passively.

Repeat this for 3 sets, with increasing pumping from 30 to 40 to 50 pumps per set.

In between sets, take a deep breath, and release, and then a gentle abdominal breath and retain the breath with increasing duration from round to round. So first 20, then 30, and in the last round 40 seconds. As you become more used to and skilled doing Kapalabhati, the pumping and the retentions can be gradually increased.

BENEFITS

Regular practice

- cleanses the nasal passage, drains the sinuses, and eliminates accumulated mucus;
- greatly strengthens and increases the capacity of the lungs and intercostal muscles;
- removes bronchial congestion and spasm while also helping to relieve asthma;
- removes stale gases and old oxygen in the lungs, due to the forced exhalation;
- massages the intestines, stomach, liver, spleen, heart, and pancreas through movement of the diaphragm and abdominal contractions;
- strengthens your abdominal muscles and improves digestion; and
- refreshes and invigorates your mind and increases alertness as a result of the increase of oxygen to your brain.

CONTRAINDICATIONS & CAUTIONS

Kapalbhati should be avoided by those suffering from hypertension, anxiety, or panic attacks.

BREATHING EXERCISE

ANULOM VILOM

ALTERNATE NOSTRIL
BREATHING

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Place your right hand in Vishnu Mudra by folding the index and middle fingers inwards. Close your right nostril with your thumb, and breathe out completely through your left nostril.

Inhale for 4 counts through your left nostril.



Close your left nostril with the ring and little fingers so that both nostrils are now closed. Hold your breath for a count of 8.

Keeping your left nostril closed, release your right nostril and exhale completely to a count of 8.

With your left nostril closed, inhale through your right to a count of 4.

Close both nostrils and hold your breath for a count of 8.

Keeping your right nostril closed, release your fingers from your left nostril and breathe out completely for a count of 8.

This completes one round. Continue this exercise for 5 to 10 minutes.

For beginners the ratio of 1:2:2 is recommended. So 4 counts inhalation, 8 counts retention, and 8 counts exhalation.

As you become comfortable with this exercise, the ratio of the exercise can be taken to 1:4:2, which is the classical and proper way. So 4 counts inhalation, 16 counts retention, and 8 counts exhalation.

The count of the exercise may be increased, but always in a ratio of 1:4:2.

BENEFITS

Regular practice

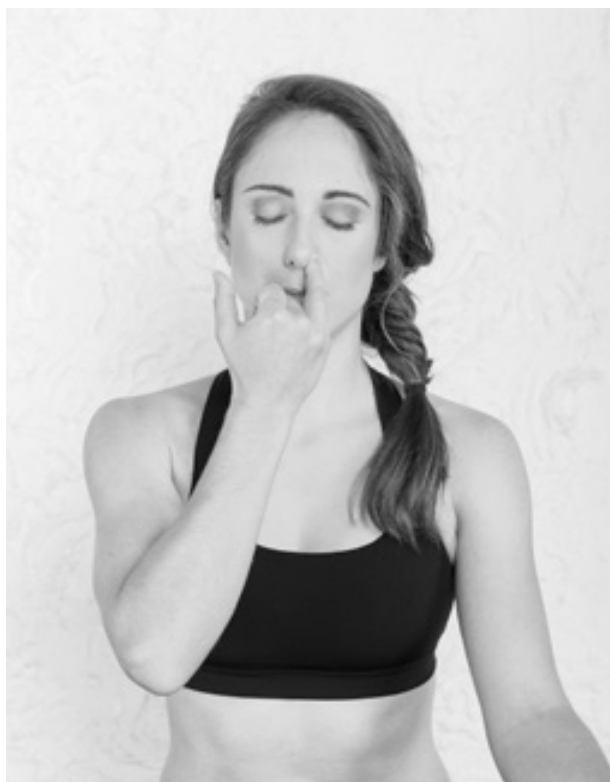
- cleanses and strengthens the entire respiratory system;
- expels more stale air and waste products from your lungs, because exhalation is twice the time of inhalation;
- decreases respiratory rate, prolongs exhalation, and thus leads to increased carbon dioxide levels in the blood, which in turn leads to improved oxygen absorption in the cells;
- helps to bring equilibrium between the solar and lunar energies in the body (The breath naturally alternates between the two nostrils, changing approximately every 2 hours. The breath in your right nostril is hot, symbolically referred to as the Sun or Pingala. It is catabolic and acceleratory to the organs of your body. The flow from your left, which is cool and referred to as the Moon or Ida, is anabolic and inhibitory to your body.);

- helps to balance the hemispheres of the brain;
- helps to calm the mind, making it lucid and steady, preparing it for meditation; and
- helps to purify the nadis, the energy tubes in the astral body.

Thus it should be mastered and practiced on a regular basis before going on to pranayama exercises.

CONTRAINDICATIONS & CAUTIONS

Anulom Vilom can be practiced by anyone and everyone, it is a truly beneficial breathing exercise. However some should skip the retentions, and only alternate the breathing in and out. Skip the retentions if you are suffering from hypertension, anxiety, or panic attacks.



Step 3: Warming up properly

A proper warm-up is essential to prepare for asana practice and also to prevent injuries. Sun Salutations are a commonly practiced warm-up that primarily warms up the central nervous system and subsequently the major muscles and joints. The fluid and dynamic movements of the Sun Salutation, though, should not be confused with asana practice. Because the Sun Salutation is performed dynamically, it does not give the same benefits as steady asanas.

Traditionally, the Sun Salutation is performed with your back toward the rising sun, your spine and spinal cord warmed by the sun's heat. Each movement of the Sun Salutation proceeds in coordination with breathing: each motion connecting to an inhale, an exhale, or a retention. With a calm and contemplative mind, you should continue the Sun Salutation only until you begin to perspire. Engaging a vast variety of muscles and joints, warming up your spine and spinal cord, regulating the breath, and focusing the mind, doing the Sun Salutation is effective and should be repeated a minimum of six rounds.

A proper warm-up takes between 10 and 20 minutes. How long you need to warm up depends on various factors: the temperature of the room, your general physical condition, your previous activities (in the morning you need to warm up longer than in the evening after a day of activity), your age, and your injuries or health conditions. Generally speaking, the older you grow the longer you might need to warm up. So after Sun Salutations, other warming-up exercises such as leg raises (to activate the Iliopsoas muscle) and dolphin (to strengthen the upper arms and back, and practice the weight-shift in preparations for inversions) can be added for variety.

It is important to remember that warming up always has to start with small, gentle movements. Initially, you should not even come close to your normal range of motion that you have when you are warmed up. Also remember that stretching with the goal of increasing your flexibility can be done safely only after you are completely warmed up. Only after several minutes, as you start to feel your body temperature rise, should you increase the speed and range of motion. In the course of the warm-up the intensity of the exercises has to go up. This can be achieved by increasing their speed, their range of motion, or their force.

WARMING UP

SURYA NAMASKARA

CLASSICAL SUN SALUTATION

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Starting position: Stand straight, with spine erect and shoulders relaxed. Your feet are hip-width apart. Your knees are straight but not hyper-extended; your arms are relaxed next to your body.

1. Breathe in and out, bringing your palms together in front of your chest.

Shoulders and elbows are relaxed.
Knees are straight but relaxed.
Back of your neck is long.
Reach up with the crown of your head toward the ceiling.

2. Breathe in and reach with your arms—up and backward.

Your arms are alongside your ears.
Look diagonally upward, do not drop your head back.
Knees are straight, hips pushing slightly forward.

3. Breathe out and bend forward, placing your palms on the floor, outside of your feet.

If you cannot place your palms on the floor with your knees straight, you can bend your knees slightly.

Reach with your nose toward your knees.

4. Keeping your hands there, inhale and bring your right leg back as far as possible.

Place your right knee on the floor, pointing your right foot.
Push your pelvis forward without losing the 90-degree angle of your left knee.



Open your chest, look diagonally upward while palms remain on the floor.

5. Hold the breath and bring your left leg back.

Your body is in a straight line from your head to your heels (push-up position).

6. Breathe out and drop your knees, chest, and forehead to the floor.

Without moving your body backward, bring your chest down to the floor between your hands. Then bring your forehead to the floor.

Knees, chest, and forehead are touching the floor; hips are off the floor.

7. Breathe in and scoop forward and up, looking up and backward.

Open your chest and look up and back without dropping the head.

Legs remain on the floor, feet are pointed.

Do not move your hands as you come into this position.



Elbows are slightly bent, tucked in toward your body, and your shoulders are pushing down.

8. Breathe out, curl your toes, and push your hips up to the ceiling.

Without moving your hands or feet, push your hips toward the ceiling.

Your hands are flat on the floor, heels can be slightly lifted off the floor. Head is between your arms. Look at your feet, trying to bring your chest to your knees.

9. Breathe in and bring your right foot forward in between your hands.

Keep your fingers and toes in one line.

Drop your left knee to the floor, point your left foot, and push your pelvis forward and toward your right heel.

Look diagonally upward—the same as in Position 4.

10. Breathe out, and keeping your hands where they are, curl the toes of your left foot and step your left foot forward, next to your right foot.

Nose in between your knees, hands holding your ankles.

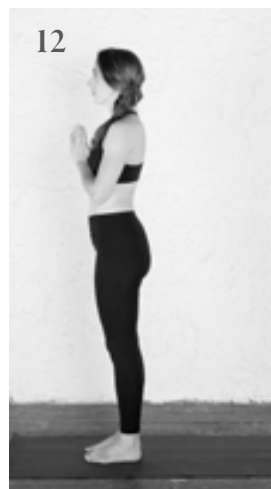
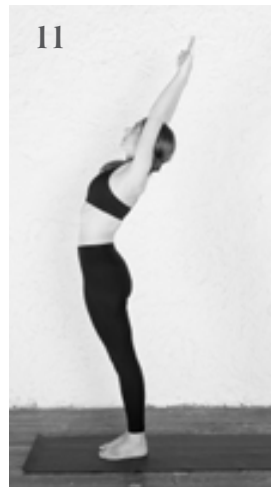
Keep your knees straight.

11. Breathe in and reach with your hands out and upward.

Arch backward—the same as in Position 2.

12. Breathe out, bring your hands in front of your chest.

This completes half a round. Repeat to the left (left leg stepping first back and forward) to complete one full round of Sun Salutation. Perform 6 - 8 rounds, then rest in Corpse Pose.



WARMING UP

DOUBLE LEG RAISES

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Lie on your back, with your feet together and flexed.

Keep your arms by your sides, with your palms facing downward.

Your hands are either tucked in toward your hips or under your hips for extra support.

Keep your back flat on the mat, with the back of your neck elongated and your chin tucked slightly in.

Lift both your legs up until almost perpendicular to the floor and gently lower them down again (only as far as you can still keep the control in your abdomen and your lower back relatively flat against the floor).

Repeat 6 times, then rest in Corpse Pose.



WARMING UP DOLPHIN

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

Sit on your knees, with your hips resting on your heels.

Place your elbows on the floor, and keeping them in the same position, bring your hands forward and clasp them tightly.

Keeping your knees on the floor, lift your hips up (keeping your knees hip-width apart).

Make sure that your shoulders are right above your elbows, then walk your knees back, until they are positioned slightly behind your hips.

Curl your toes, straighten your knees, and push your hips up and backward.

Now move your torso forward, reaching with the chin to the floor, just in front of your hands.

From there, move your torso backward again, until your forehead hovers just above the floor behind your hands, with your hips reaching up and backward.

This completes one repetition. Repeat 10 – 15 times, then rest in Child's Pose.



Step 4: True asana – Finding steadiness and ease within the pose

Once your body is warmed up, the practice of asanas can begin. As explained earlier, holding the asanas in a steady and comfortable manner is essential in Hatha Yoga. The duration can be increased in relation to your progress. With regular practice, your ability to stay in a pose with ease will continue to develop. This being said, it is of course part of your journey to challenge yourself to stay longer, go further, or increase the complexity of the pose. These efforts should always be accompanied with conscious breathing and should never render you breathless, in pain, or feeling unwell.

Remember that a steady pose does not mean static or rigid. Even though the outer form of the asana may look still, your inner experience should not become an experience of confinement or rigor. As we have learnt earlier when talking about the effect of Hatha Yoga on our body's fascia: movement and life go hand in hand. So even though you are holding an asana steadily, you remain aware of the different directions of energy necessary to maintain the pose. You remain alert to the effects of the pose on your body and breath. As the asana is held, within your body there is a conscious and active process that brings you deeper into the pose or in other cases closer to the full expression of the pose. So even though you may look still, internally you are engaging and expanding in all directions, using your breath and consciousness to stay in the realms of ease and effortlessness.

Step 5: Countering poses and maintaining balance within your body

In a balanced yoga asana practice, it is important to include forward bends, backbends, inversions, side bends, twists, and balancing postures. It is also important to sequence the practice in such a way that all of these elements are included and especially that the forward bends and backbends are well-balanced, taking into account their intensity and duration. This helps to create and maintain flexibility of your spine.

Often, students with chronic lower-back pain do not like to do backbends such as Cobra Pose and Bow Pose. They prefer doing forward bends because they experience immediate relief. However, chronic lower-back pain is often caused by a weak core and weak lower back muscles. By strengthening and stretching these muscles as well working on core awareness and strength, while maintaining a balanced ratio of forward and backward bends during your asana practice, many cases of chronic back pain can be relieved.

When considering the effects on the internal organs and endocrine system, the principle of counter-poses is equally important. Some poses provide extra benefits when done in a specific order. Some poses exert a strong pressure on a specific body part, and the squeeze-and-release effect on that part is amplified by the proper order of poses and their counter poses. For example, Upward Plank Pose becomes more effective if performed directly after a forward bend such as Seated Forward Bend.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



RAM JAIN

Ram is the Founding Director of the Arhanta Yoga Ashrams (India and The Netherlands). Within the last 10 years, the Arhanta Yoga Ashrams have become renowned internationally for their professional yoga teacher training courses, and have up to present trained over 3000 yoga teachers from all over the world.

Born in New Delhi, India, in a traditional and spiritual family, his yoga and Vedic philosophy education started at the age of eight years as a part of his primary school education. He has in-depth knowledge of classical Hatha Yoga and is also well versed in ancient Indian scriptures.

During his 19 years of teaching career, he has worked with various anatomy and physiology experts and has developed unique teaching, adjustment, and modification techniques.

Presently, he is the lead teacher for various teacher training programs, ranging from Hatha Yoga, Yin Yoga, Vinyasa Yoga, to Meditation and Yoga Nidra. He teaches for several months a year in India and the rest of the year in the Netherlands, where he also lives with his wife and two children.



KALYANI HAUSWIRTH-JAIN

Kalyani is a senior teacher & Creative Director at the Arhanta Yoga Ashrams since 2013. She was born and raised in Switzerland. Since early adolescence she has been fascinated by art, bodywork, the body-mind connection. The mother of two children now, she has been teaching yoga for over 10 years, training yoga teachers for more than eight years at the Arhanta Yoga Ashrams in India and the Netherlands.

Starting off with physical challenges, she transformed her body, mastering many advanced asanas with her regular practice and discipline. By following a diligent self-practice, working with many different teachers, styles, and techniques, she gained a profound understanding of physiology and movement techniques.

This, in combination with her extensive teaching experience, gave her an understanding of the importance of structure and sequencing for a holistic yoga asana practice.

ABOUT ARHANTA YOGA ASHRAMS

At Arhanta Yoga ® our mission is to provide internationally accredited professional yoga courses and training in a non-sectarian way, while maintaining the authenticity of the ancient teachings. Since 2009 more than 3000 yoga teachers have graduated from Arhanta Yoga Ashrams.

Arhanta Yoga Ashrams are Registered Yoga School (RYS) with Yoga Alliance, International Yoga Federation, European Yoga Association and CRKBO (The Netherlands). Our courses meet and exceed the international standards of 200 hours and our certification is accepted by all major yoga institutions, yoga federations and insurance companies.

The 200 hour Yoga Teacher Training is our foundational course for becoming a yoga teacher. This course is an intensive training to become a professional and worldwide accredited yoga teacher in 26 days. The course is designed only with one goal – to make you a confident yoga teacher.

It is a proven and tested course which has been developed and refined over the period of last 10 years.

After the course you will be able to teach yoga with confidence and proper certification. This is our guarantee!

COURSE HIGHLIGHTS

During our 200 hour yoga teacher training course you will

- benefit from a well-rounded, time-proven curriculum: 170 Hatha Yoga asanas, in-depth yogic philosophy, extensive yoga anatomy, daily pranayama & meditation and much more;
- become confident to teach with 60 hours hands-on teaching practice;
- acquire expert teaching skills as you learn how to give proper instructions, and how to apply corrections and modification techniques;
- learn how to sequence yoga postures to create classes featuring various goals and themes;
- learn how to teach people of different ages, backgrounds and body types;
- receive a worldwide accredited yoga teacher certification in 26 intensive days;
- be fully immersed into the yogic lifestyle as you study at a traditional yoga ashram; and
- receive guidance for how to start your own yoga school / yoga studio.

Most of our students are surprised on how much they could learn in such a short period. And once you have completed the course, we are still there for you with our post-course support and mentoring:

FOR ANY QUESTIONS AND GUIDANCE:

We provide a top notch post course support to all of our students. Our teachers can be easily contacted via phone, email and instant messaging regarding any questions about teaching, philosophy or your personal yoga practice.

FOR TEACHING / ASSISTING OPPORTUNITIES:

We provide two kinds of intern opportunities to all of our students. You can come as a volunteer to work in our team for a period of 1-3 months, or you can come as a trainee for period of 3-6 months. Both opportunities will help you develop your teaching skills and confidence even further.

FOR STARTING YOUR TEACHING CAREER:

Every student is provided guidance in finding a yoga teacher job or starting up their own yoga studio. Our years of experience in running yoga schools and centers is available to all our graduates. We help them with advice ranging from market research website setup to renewal systems.

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