The Power of ASHTANGA YOGA II

Includes the Complete Intermediate Series

A Practice to Open Your Heart and Purify Your Body and Mind

KINO MACGREGOR

The Power of ASHTANGA YOGA II

YOGA II The Intermediate Series

A Practice to Open Your Heart and Purify Your Body and Mind

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PART ONE

Philosophy

1

An Introduction to the Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga

ASHTANGA YOGA IS A DISCIPLINED AND DEVOTIONAL PATH that not everyone will have the courage and determination to stay with. Even the most talented practitioners give up along the way before they experience the deep peace that comes from years of practice. Sometimes the sheer difficulty of maintaining a daily practice is daunting, or the complexity of the postures steers interested students away. In this apparent difficulty is the true magic of the Ashtanga Yoga method, because it is only through triumph over adversity that we find deep meaning in the practice—and in life.

The Ashtanga Yoga Intermediate Series is one of the most demanding yoga practices; however, the rewards are proportional to the depth and difficulty of the practice.

The basic starting requirement for the Intermediate Series is that you maintain a consistent practice of the Primary Series six days a week for at least a year and pass through the key gateway postures of the Primary Series. The postures of the Intermediate Series require that you cross over large hurdles of strength and flexibility. Regular practice of the Intermediate Series is almost inevitably a catalyst for making lifestyle changes that reflect this disciplined practice.

My previous book, *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga*, details the principles and practice of the Primary Series of the Ashtanga Yoga method. This book delves into the Second Series. If you are new to Ashtanga Yoga, I strongly recommend that you start off with the Primary Series. Even if you are an advanced student of another yoga discipline, you should not expect to jump into the Ashtanga Yoga Intermediate Series. When you are starting a new method, you should always start with the basics, regardless of how much mastery you have attained in another form of yoga.

The physical practice of Ashtanga Yoga is defined by the Tristhana method, which comprises the three prongs of breath (*pranayama*), posture (*asana*), and focal point (*drishti*). These three components are present in every Ashtanga Yoga practice. Contained within them is the inner work of core strength, known as Mula Bandha (Root Lock) for the pelvic floor and Uddiyana Bandha (Upward Flying Lock) for the lower belly. For an in-depth discussion of the Tristhana method and the bandhas, please consult *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga*.

The practice is divided into six series of poses that increase in difficulty and complexity. The Ashtanga Yoga Primary Series is called *yoga chikitsa*. The Second, or Intermediate, Series is called *nadi shodhana*. The Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Series are all part of the Advanced Practice called *shtira baga*, which is sometimes poetically interpreted as "strength and grace." They are known respectively as Advanced A, B, C, and D.

It takes many years to begin to understand how the Ashtanga Yoga method works. If you look ahead at some of the postures in the Intermediate or Advanced series, they may look exciting and fun. You may even be tempted to try them out. However, once you begin the sincere practice of Ashtanga Yoga, it is best to commit to learning it step by step in its entirety rather than choosing poses ad hoc based on personal preference. In this way, you will protect your body from injury and develop respect for the practice.

MY BACKGROUND

My teachers are Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and his grandson, R. Sharath Jois. I first traveled to Mysore, India, when I was twenty-three years old, and my meeting with Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, whom I called Guruji, changed my life. I never imagined that I would become a yoga teacher or devote my life to this practice, but the seed of awakening was planted deep within me the moment I looked into Guruji's eyes. Even though he has passed away, he is still the heart and soul of the practice for me.

On my first trip to India, I studied the Primary Series of Ashtanga Yoga, but Guruji told me at the end of that trip that if I came back to Mysore, he would teach me the Intermediate Series. He said that with a flexible body, the practice would be "no problem" for me. It took me a little more than a year to return to India, and true to his word, Guruji immediately began teaching me the Intermediate Series. While I recommend that students stay with the practice and take a long time to truly master each posture, my journey through the Intermediate Series was fast. In one week, I completed the entire series under the guidance of Guruji and Sharath, and then for the remainder of my stay in Mysore, they asked me to maintain a daily practice of the Intermediate Series in order to integrate the main lessons contained within this practice on a spiritual, emotional, and physical level.

For the next three years, the Intermediate Series was part of my daily practice, even as I began to learn the challenging Third Series. Although I completed the order of postures in the Intermediate Series, my learning has continued throughout fifteen years of practice. Whereas I learned the Primary and Intermediate Series in two consecutive trips to Mysore, learning the Third Series took three extended trips of up to six months each. Finally, after six more trips to continue my studies with R. Sharath Jois at the Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore, I completed the nearly impossible Fourth Series.

My experience in the entire method of Ashtanga Yoga informs the technique, direction, and guidance contained within this book. I present the poses of the Intermediate Series within the framework of the four series of the Ashtanga Yoga method that I practice. There will be postures that reflect back on the lessons learned within the Primary Series and look ahead toward the Advanced Series. None of the postures should be glossed over or taken for granted. The entire method of Ashtanga Yoga is to be cherished and appreciated like a precious family heirloom that has been passed into your care. Regardless of how many asanas you may learn or even master, it is important to remember that the Ashtanga Yoga method is a lifestyle and a spiritual practice.

The sacred bond between teacher and student in the Ashtanga Yoga method is essential for proper practice of the Intermediate Series. Any book, including mine, can only be a supplement—not a replacement—for a qualified teacher.

The importance of tradition in the Ashtanga Yoga method cannot be overstated. I did not "invent" this practice. I learned it from my teachers, and I am sharing the results of my daily personal practice with you so that these insights can guide your journey along the path.

PRACTICING THE INTERMEDIATE SERIES

The Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga is a challenging combination of deep backbends, twists, leg-behind-the-head poses, and strength poses. Before you even consider starting the Intermediate Series, it is absolutely crucial that you have practiced the Primary Series consistently and understood some basic philosophical principles about the Ashtanga Yoga method. If you move too quickly into the Intermediate Series, you risk becoming burnt out, frustrated, and injured. Learning the Intermediate Series slowly under the guidance of a qualified teacher will ground your practice in the deep purification work that it requires. Learning it one posture at a time in the traditional manner is crucial to developing the internal awareness you need to continue.

One of the most important lessons I have learned from practicing Ashtanga Yoga is to relax and let go of unnecessary effort, especially when you are extremely attached to learning a particular asana. The energy of the practice flows much more freely if you relax into the postures rather than trying to force your way into them. Even if you are only doing a few of the Intermediate Series poses—either as part of your daily Ashtanga Yoga practice or in another yoga discipline—remember to relax and apply only appropriate effort.

The Intermediate Series is a purification superhighway. *Nadi shodhana* is literally translated into English as "nervous system cleansing," and the purpose of this series is to challenge your nervous system using asanas as a false, self-imposed stress so that you practice how to remain calm and clear in the midst of challenging life situations. While the entire Ashtanga Yoga method teaches you how to remain steady when facing difficulty, the emotional aspect of this journey is highlighted in the Intermediate Series. The nervous system includes the brain, spinal cord, vagus nerve complex, and all the nerves that travel through the whole body. The nervous system affects the function of the entire body, but seriously impacts the function of the heart and disgestive system, even though it is concentrated within the spine. The entire Intermediate Series challenges the spine to be strong and flexible through deep spinal extensions, twists, flexions, and stabilizations.

There are three sections to the Intermediate Series and a final section of headstands. I have organized this book according to these sections. First, you will move through an intensive backbending segment that demands that you be emotionally open and courageous while doing the deep spinal extensions. Second, you will learn to be strong as you support the weight of your legs moving behind your head, which requires deep external hip rotations supported by a strong spinal flexion. Third, you will balance and articulate strength and control through your spine, shoulders, and nervous system in a series of arm balances and shoulder openers.

The seven headstands that come at the end of the Intermediate Series were not actually taught as part of this series, so they can be considered an additional series of postures that Guruji added, perhaps to strengthen the neck and spine in preparation for the Third Series. The seven headstands test the strength of the spine and the articulation of the shoulders and help prepare you for advancing further in the Ashtanga Yoga method.

HOW THE PRIMARY SERIES PREPARES YOU FOR THE INTERMEDIATE SERIES

As mentioned earlier, the Primary Series of Ashtanga Yoga is the foundation for the practice of the Intermediate Series. Being established in the Primary Series is a clear indication that you have understood some of the basic principles you will need to successfully practice the Intermediate Series.

The first principle that must be established is the ability to meet obstacles that arise within the body and mind and not to back down or run away. During regular practice of the Primary Series, you will have faced a series of challenges and will already understand how the practice asks you to work on a daily basis with places of difficulty—and to ultimately transform your body and mind. If you do not fully understand how to practice in the face of adversity, you will be overwhelmed and deflated by the Intermediate Series. The poses are full of obstacles to be faced and ultimately mastered. The majority of people who quit Ashtanga Yoga do so somewhere within the Intermediate Series because many of these obstacles seem insurmountable. Students get frustrated and expect quick results, and when those results don't occur right away, people abandon the method. Some students never fully understand why the Ashtanga Yoga method asks you to humbly master each asana before proceeding onward. They would prefer to mix and match the postures to fit their preference. However, surrendering to the set series of Ashtanga Yoga and the lessons that the poses present is the essence of yoga itself.

While the purpose of daily practice is not to gather facility and expertise in more and more asanas, it does feel good to progress steadily through the series. When you get stuck, it challenges your assumptions about your physical, mental, and spiritual capability. How you face those challenges within yourself and within your practice is where the work of Ashtanga Yoga really begins.

On a practical level, the postures of the Primary Series build the strength and flexibility required in the Intermediate Series. If you cannot maintain stability at the first level, it makes no sense to proceed onward to the second level. You are prepared for the Intermediate Series when you have progressed through the key gateway poses of the Primary Series. The first signal that you might be ready to start the Intermediate Series comes from a firm sense of mental and physical balance in Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose).

Marichasana D is the crescendo of the Marichasana (Poses Dedicated to Sage Marichi) poses that represent the middle hurdle of the Primary Series. The ability to perform this posture with assistance from a teacher or on your own shows that you have mastered the basics of twisting as well as external hip rotation. Binding your hands and feet in Supta Kurmasana (Sleeping Turtle Pose)—with help from a teacher or on your own—indicates that your shoulders and hips are simultaneously open and strong, that your back is strong and flexible, and that your mind is able to maintain focus under pressure. Finally, standing up from and dropping back to Urdhva Danurasana (Lifted Bow Pose) demonstrates the strength and flexibility necessary for the deep backbends of the Intermediate Series.

There is some debate within the Ashtanga community as to whether the initial backbends of the Intermediate Series could be used to train students in the mechanics of deeper backbends or whether proficiency in standing up from and dropping back to Urdhva Danurasana is a strict prerequisite to starting the Intermediate Series. R. Sharath Jois, Guruji's grandson, is firm in

his requirement that students be proficient at this movement before commencing their Intermediate Series practice, whereas Guruji was not always as strict. Ideally this question is addressed on a case-by-case basis between student and teacher.

Backbends are often quite challenging for many students, and the movement of standing up and dropping back can be a difficult project. It is best to master this skill before starting the Intermediate Series, because as you go forward in your practice, you will need your full attention to master this movement. My personal standard is to have only one major project within the practice each day; otherwise, it can be physically and psychologically exhausting. Sometimes students are naturally gifted with strength or flexibility — and that makes practicing the poses easy for them. I especially advise these students not to rush into more and more advanced postures, but to let the practice settle over many months (and even years) so that the deeper and more subtle aspects of the practice can begin to work. A basic rule of thumb is that any new student to Ashtanga Yoga should maintain a consistent practice of the Primary Series for one full year before considering whether to start the Intermediate Series, regardless of their level of proficiency. Just because you can do a posture on the first try does not mean that the energy and lesson of each posture is integrated completely. Only regular practice grounds you in the true benefits of the practice.

Consistency is another benchmark that must be established prior to commencement of the Intermediate Series. For example, a flexible practitioner who can do all the poses but only practices once a week is not ready to start the Intermediate Series. On the other hand, a less flexible student who puts in the work of a daily discipline will develop the mental and spiritual fortitude required for the Intermediate Series, even if he or she is less advanced at the physical aspect of asanas.

Perhaps the best way to determine your aptitude level is to check with your regular Ashtanga Yoga teacher. He or she will be the best judge of whether or not you are ready to start the Intermediate Series. If you do not have a teacher, I recommend that you build a relationship with an authorized or certified teacher. Traversing the inner world of yoga without a guide can sometimes feel rather daunting. If you do not have support for your practice when you jump into the waters of the Second Series, it may sometimes feel

like drowning. I intend this book to be a guide and a friend for you to take along on this inner journey, but there is no substitute for working directly with a teacher who can give you hands-on assistance when necessary.

While some poses in the Primary Series are easy to modify, those in the Intermediate Series are not. In the Ashtanga Yoga method, almost everyone can practice through the halfway point in the Primary Series (Marichasana D or Navasana [Boat Pose]) with easy adjustments to suit their individual needs. For the Intermediate Series, you should not modify a posture and move on to the next one. In this book, you will not see any modifications at all, because Ashtanga Yoga has different principles and a different methodology for the advanced postures. Modification is not advisable in the Intermediate Series because of the intensity and depth of the practice. Instead of modifying and moving on, the Intermediate Series asks you to stay with one pose and delve deeply within yourself for newfound flexibility and strength. You are called on to make a shift from the newness of yoga to a lifelong relationship with the discipline.

I have known students who stopped at a certain posture within the Intermediate Series for more than ten years without advancing. They never quit; they maintained their daily practice, often repeating difficult asanas many times each day. After years of devotion and dedication, they experienced the necessary shifts in body and mind and attained the much-awaited goal of progress. I myself have been stuck at a certain posture for more than fifteen years and I still keep going. If you just skip what is difficult, then the practice can never teach you. It is in confronting difficulty that the practice becomes the mirror of your deepest self. The longer you stay in places of difficulty, the deeper your inward gaze will be. Be humble, surrender to the journey, and put in the work every day.

STARTING THE INTERMEDIATE SERIES PRACTICE

When you are truly ready to start the Intermediate Series, the traditional way to begin is by adding one posture at a time to the end of the Primary Series. After Setu Bandhasana (Spinal Lift Bridge Pose) and before your backbends, you add on the pose you are working on from the Intermediate Series. This usually starts with the first posture, Pasasana (Noose Pose). Maintain the full Primary Series with the addition of Pasasana until you master that pose. Then continue adding on postures sequentially, one by one, until you have integrated many of the Intermediate Series poses into your daily practice.

This longer practice of Primary and a portion of the Intermediate Series is traditionally done Sunday through Thursday. On Friday, it is recommended that all Ashtangis practice only the Primary Series. (The actual days of practice matter less than maintaining the same days of practice each week. For example, whichever day you take off should be the same each week, and you should ideally do Primary Series on the day before your rest day.) It is important to maintain a day of Primary Series with light backbending, regardless of what level of asanas you have reached. This lets your body rest and establishes health and balance in the body. Even if you can easily perform each posture of the Intermediate Series, building up slowly and adding one asana at a time will allow you to focus on proper alignment and technique while giving the pose time to settle. Each posture should be integrated fully into your practice before you add the next one. If you are working without the guidance of a teacher, you might add one pose per month as long as you can perform the poses easily, but stop adding when you reach a point of difficulty.

If you are following the traditional method, you will find that adding more and more postures from the Intermediate Series to your practice creates a rather lengthy practice at some point. Maintaining a long practice builds physical and mental endurance and strength. Do not skip poses, jump around, or modify when you get to this point. Instead, remain steady and focused.

A good time to split the Intermediate Series from the Primary Series comes when you have learned all the postures of the Intermediate Series up until and including Karandavasana (Mighty Duck). While Guruji used to split the series for different people in different places, depending on their needs, this was the most common place for the practice to separate. Once you have made the split, your daily practice would be Sun Salutations, standing poses, the appropriate poses of the Intermediate Series, backbends, and closing postures—not including any postures from the Primary Series—on Sunday through Thursday and only Primary Series on Friday. It is usually just before this splitting point that many students get fatigued. If you stay with the practice through that point, you will develop a clear, calm mind. Depending on your teacher's advice, when you get to Karandavasana, you might start adding the practice of handstands as outlined in the practice section of this book.

Once you start practicing the Intermediate Series, do not stop, no matter how difficult it seems. Continuity and consistency are the key to the success of this series. Maintaining a daily practice means you will do the same thing every day, though not in the same way. You do not have to demand the same level of flexibility, strength, or energy in your practice every day. Just showing up on the mat is enough. Give yourself permission to do each asana in the way that naturally presents itself.

Never push through sharp pain in your joints. If anything in your experience indicates joint compression, which is usually signaled by sharp pain in a joint, back off immediately. It is an indication that your alignment is not correct and that if you proceed forcefully, you could injure yourself. While you can expect muscular soreness, you should never feel sharp or pinching pains in your joints.

If you are not able to maintain stability in your breathing, you may be practicing too many asanas. If you are trying to conceive a child or are pregnant, regular practice of the Intermediate Series may generate too much internal heat to be sustainable. As a precaution, each woman should consult her doctor and modify her practice as appropriate. Ashtanga Yoga practice can be maintained throughout pregnancy, but it should emphasize relaxation and health rather than cleansing.

THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF THE INTERMEDIATE SERIES

When I first learned the Intermediate Series, I had no idea how it would change my life. I just thought these were some cool postures that would be fun to try. But when I integrated them into my daily practice, I faced emotional, physical, and mental obstacles that were larger and more difficult than I could have imagined. I was pushed by the practice itself to give up long-treasured habits like sleeping in, eating junk food, staying up late, and going to parties. The Intermediate Series challenged my body's physical limits of strength and flexibility, stirred up deep emotions such as sadness and anger, and left me feeling vulnerable and weak. But luckily it did not stop there. After many years of practice, the Intermediate Series has left me with a healthy lifestyle, a peaceful disposition, and far more mental and physical strength than I ever thought I would have.

Once you start to practice the Intermediate Series, you can expect to confront some major changes in your body and mind. Some common experiences include heightened emotionality, anger and irritability, electrical impulses running through the spine and nervous system, sleeplessness, feelings of euphoria, and weepiness. Many students experience doubt in the method and in themselves when they start the practice, because the back muscles are often sore from the deep practice of backbends.

Guruji often said that the Intermediate Series stimulates the nervous system and increases the flow of energy throughout the whole body. He recommended eating ghee to help calm the nervous system and keep the nerves healthy. If you are not keen on eating clarified butter, then I recommend eating a good balance of essential fatty acids while learning the backbending portion of the Intermediate Series.

Backbends often brings up strong emotions when students first begin to practice them more regularly and go deeper. This may happen whether you are flexible or stiff in your spine. Most backbending movements require a lot of strength, stamina, and flexibility. It takes lots of practice before you feel confident about integrating a full backbending sequence into your daily practice. Good technique and anatomical awareness are crucial to the longterm practice of backbends. Again, be aware that when learning how to safely bend your back you may experience rational and irrational emotions. Sometimes the most flexible students have the most troubling emotions arising when they start practicing backbends.

When I first started Ashtanga Yoga, I was more naturally flexible than strong. That does not mean it was easy for me to do deep backbends. When I was first learning and regularly practicing the backbends of the Intermediate Series, my back muscles were so sore every day that I could not slouch at all. I had to maintain a straightened, uplifted spine throughout the day or else my back would hurt. These backbends changed my posture almost instantly; after a few months, my back was strong, my natural posture was straighter, and I was more established in the method of Ashtanga Yoga. That doesn't mean I did not sometimes feel overwhelmed when I realized that what I may have been able to do once or twice, I had to do every day regardless of what I might prefer. I remember one of the first times I did the deep backbend called Kapotasana (Pigeon Pose), which is the crescendo posture of the Intermediate Series backbends. I was so disoriented that I wondered if my body would ever "unbend" itself. But it certainly did unbend, and now this pose is part of my regular Ashtanga Yoga practice. Respecting the power of the practice and the postures is part of the humble devotion that the Intermediate Series teaches you.

Hip opening brings up a similar emotional experience. Physical tightness, emotional blocks, and hidden memories often lie deep within the pelvis. Externally rotating your hips to bring your legs behind your head triggers the release and awareness of these sleeping demons. Whereas backbends bring the energy up the spine in an extended position, the leg-behind-the-head poses bring the energy up the spine through a flexed position. These postures require more strength and can be equally hard for someone with natural hip flexibility but low muscle tone and someone who has strong but tight muscles.

The strength poses of the Intermediate Series are so difficult that they break many students' egos. The ego must often be broken so that the tender, vulnerable heart that rests within each of us can be revealed. There have been times when I have succeeded at a posture or movement within the Intermediate Series only to cry and collapse after completing it, simply because it was so hard. Mastering these movements shows that you are the master of your emotions, not a slave to them.

One of the deepest lessons in the Intermediate Series practice is about bringing the energy up the spine and cleansing the nervous system. Backbends, leg-behind-the-head poses, and the dynamic strength movements all thrust your full life force up through the central channel and burn through blockages along the way. Blockages are places in your physical, emotional, or energetic body where accumulated patterns are stuck and do not respond quickly to the request to change. Intense blockages are sometimes referred to as karmic knots. When one of these blockages gets triggered, it really does not matter what posture you are doing, because mastering your response to the triggered emotional state is the essence of the practice. When things are difficult, scary, and emotional, it is hard to remain calm, breathe, and think clearly, but the Intermediate Series demands that you do exactly this. An experienced teacher can support your process, direct your body with sound instruction, and finally give the process back to you when you are ready, but this is a journey to which you must commit on your own.

Whether you feel anxiety, sadness, anger, or physical pain when practicing the Intermediate Series regularly, the key is to learn how to stay with the difficult places and work through them. The natural tendency is to run away when things get tough, but the practice of Ashtanga Yoga teaches you how to find your way gracefully through whatever obstacles may arise in your practice—and in your life. Your job is to stay the course and use sound anatomical alignment, deep breathing, and a courageous heart to follow the path.

MYSORE STYLE PRACTICE

It is usually when students start the Intermediate Series that they also feel a desire to teach. The first qualification for a good teacher is a solid foundation in the practice and method of Ashtanga Yoga, and by completing the Primary Series and preparing to begin the Second Series, most students have built that foundation. The Ashtanga Yoga method relies on a system of teaching called the Mysore Style. This methodology is named after the South Indian city where the founder, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, lived and taught for the majority of his life. His grandson, R. Sharath Jois, now directs the Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore.

Direct experience (*pratyaksa*) is the highest form of knowledge, and ideally it is from this platform that Mysore Style instructors teach. It is also important that a teacher has gone through healing and personal transformation through the Ashtanga Yoga method over the course of many years. This personal transformation comes after years of practice have burned away many internal blockages. While not the same as complete enlightenment, the ideal qualification of the teacher is that they themselves have gone through the journey of Ashtanga Yoga and learned to face many challenges through it.

One of the distinguishing features of the Ashtanga Yoga method is that the Mysore Style practice demands a great deal from both the student and the teacher. Students are required to memorize the order of postures assigned to them by their teacher and practice accordingly on their own in a group setting. The teacher is then able to give hands-on adjustments and verbal instruction to each individual student as is appropriate for them.

In order to teach Mysore Style, an unusually deep level of personal experience and education in the field of yoga is required. There is really no training program that makes you into a Mysore teacher. My husband and I have developed a long-term apprenticeship with teachers who are part of our community in Miami and who we think are ready to teach Mysore Style. And even that is insufficient to establish students fully in this method of teaching. Only direct experience over many years as a student in the Ashtanga Yoga lineage is the foundation of being a Mysore teacher.

One of the key tests for an Ashtanga Yoga Mysore teacher, and for students as well, is dealing with pain and/or injury. Almost everyone loves the practice when it is easy, but students are truly tested when a yoga-induced injury arises. Dedicated students will not quit when these injuries occur but will learn how to allow the pain to teach them to modify their approach and ultimately lead to healing. Good teachers know how to work with an injury in their own body and help students work through pain toward healing with compassion and correct technique adjustment. The best teachers understand how to work with the Ashtanga Yoga method under all conditions: when students have energy and potential, pain and injury, or balance and anxiety.

But a good foundation in the Ashtanga Yoga method means more than just jumping through well, doing deep backbends, holding a handstand, or completing a certain series. It means understanding the true depth and power of the method as a science for healing the body, mind, and soul. Other recommendations—if not absolute requirements—for anyone considering teaching, include in-depth anatomical knowledge, study of primary yoga texts like the Yoga Sutras, and practice at least within the Intermediate Series. It goes without saying that anyone considering teaching the Ashtanga Yoga method would do well to consider multiple trips to India to study at the K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore.

More than that, a Mysore Style Ashtanga Yoga teacher ideally carries the integrity of the lineage within his or her heart. The teacher's solid character inspires faith in the student. Even now, when I think of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, I

rest in the full faith that I have in his integrity as a teacher and a person. As a student, I never witnessed or experienced anything that would call his integrity into question. In the Mysore room, whether in India or anywhere else, students go through deep personal transformations, and they rely on their teacher to be the guide through the darkness and into the light. The yoga room holds the potential for evolution because it is like a temple erected in honor of the sacred space within. Students have to trust their teacher to guard the consecrated grounds of the inner body.

To teach Mysore Style, there can be absolutely no murky aura around the teacher. He or she must clearly hold the space of the lineage with grace, power, and strength. If there is competition between students on a physical level, the teacher must address these issues with the students individually and together. Similarly, there is no room for flirtation or anything that could be misconstrued as flirtation. For students to trust that the space created for their personal journey is safe, they have to trust the intention of the teacher every step of the way. If there is even a hint of flirtation in the interaction, then students may doubt the teacher's motives, or the teacher may take advantage of his or her position of power over students and manipulate students for his or her own purposes.

Power can be addictive and destructive, and teaching is a power relationship, meaning there is an inherent imbalance of power. The student has to learn to surrender to the teacher, and it is the moral responsibility of the teacher to fully deserve that surrender and keep his or her intentions pure when in the Mysore room. The eight-limbed path of Ashtanga Yoga includes a precise emphasis on the moral and ethical guidelines of a yogic lifestyle, and it is crucial that—at the very least—teachers do their absolute best to embody the moral foundation of the yoga tradition while teaching.

Ideally, teachers live the full yogic lifestyle while teaching, practicing, and throughout their entire lives. But yoga teachers are not saints. We get angry, frustrated, depressed, and anxious just like everyone else. We eat too much chocolate and fried food, and we have our sins and vices. The key is to understand that, as yoga teachers, we have a responsibility to honor and represent the best of the lineage in every instance possible.

DAILY DISCIPLINE

Ashtanga Yoga is a daily discipline. Once you begin the Intermediate Series, it becomes strikingly apparent that this practice is not a hobby—it is something that will transform every aspect of your life.

The order of postures in Ashtanga Yoga is predetermined and set, reflecting the methodical nature of the practice. When embarking on a new path into uncharted territory, it is important to have a map you can follow. The set series of the Ashtanga Yoga method is a kind of GPS for the soul that shows you a well-established path toward realization that has been empirically proven over years of practice. You can have faith that you will not be led astray. Quite the opposite: the more you practice, the more you will develop faith in this path as you experience its efficacy in your own body.

Some people argue that the set series of poses is boring and that they would rather decide for themselves what to practice in their yoga routine each day. The Intermediate Series is not a light practice to be undertaken for some added health benefits or for pleasure. It is a systematic retraining of the body and mind that works subtle and gross systems in the physical and energetic bodies. It is a sort of Olympic training for the body and soul, and just like an athlete, you need a coach and a method to follow. Most athletes have a coach whom they trust to create a routine that will optimize their performance. The Ashtanga Yoga method is very similar: you build a relationship with your teacher, and he or she tailors the set series of asanas to optimize your journey along the spiritual path of yoga.

In daily life, limitless decisions demand our attention and drain our mental faculties. In an average busy day, you will make a plethora of small decisions ranging from what to wear, what route to take to work, what to eat, and what to buy at the store. These small choices can be overwhelming for the superego and exhausting for the emotional body, resulting in a "decision fatigue" that is more common than you may think. Rather than taking away your freedom, the set series of postures in the Ashtanga Yoga method creates the forum for your mind to experience inner peace through the vehicle of practice. You save your decision-making energy to direct the mind deep within the subtle body. Instead of using your mental energy to make yet another small decision about

what pose to do, the Ashtanga Yoga method redefines freedom as being free from mental, physical, and spiritual obstacles.

Remaining attached to some particular notion of individualism can be an obstacle in itself. Surrendering your ego to the logic of something greater than yourself— a system devised by a yoga master that has worked well for thousands of dedicated practitioners—can be a larger freedom that burns away the limiting bonds of self-glorification. Since the order of postures is already set, you can devote your mental energy to delving deeply within yourself through the asana practice. In the Intermediate Series, you will need every ounce of mental strength you can muster to practice these challenging poses every day. There can be no question of whether or not you will do the postures because, more often than not, if you give yourself the option to skip the hard ones, you will take it. But if you surrender your ego to the practice, you will find strength in your flexibility.

Many people are attracted to doing the exciting poses or the ones they are naturally good at. Following the set series of postures is a humbling task that purifies the mind of any sense of entitlement to do only what feels good. By practicing according to the Ashtanga Yoga method, you humbly agree to put in the work, whatever that work might be, without any attachment to getting anywhere in any particular time. If you were to control the order of postures, it might feel safer than hanging out in this nebulous, groundless zone of nonattachment. However, the ability to be at peace in situations you can control and in those you can't is perhaps the greatest and most imperturbable freedom that exists. By practicing according to the set series of the Ashtanga Yoga method, you will find your true freedom within.

On a practical note, if you do not master the foundation of a movement, you cannot logically expect to move beyond it. By doing the same thing every day, you get a chance to practice it until you get better. Guruji used to say, "Practice and all is coming." But the results he was referring to are only attainable if you commit yourself to the disciplined approach of the practice. Repeating the same order of postures every day gives you the chance to perfect those that are part of your daily routine. You maintain this set practice beyond your personal preferences. You practice when it is new and exciting, peaceful and pleasant—and when you are tired and bored, hurting and discouraged. You have to pass through these stages, because the physical

training in the Ashtanga Yoga method is not actually the end goal. The peace of mind that comes from your ability to remain calm and centered in any situation is the discipline's highest goal.

NINE EASY TIPS TO MAINTAIN YOUR PERSONAL YOGA PRACTICE

When embarking on the journey into the Intermediate Series, you will need firm discipline. Think of discipline not as something imposed on you by some kind of drill sergeant, but as a daily ritual that you choose to internalize and perform, the highest potential to which you choose to dedicate your life. Once the behavior is ritualized, it will become embedded in your subconscious mind, and you will not question whether or not to perform the practice. Just as brushing your teeth is part of your morning ritual, the practice will be integrated into your daily routine without requiring a massive energy expenditure to include it each day. The following tips helped me maintain the daily practice that is the foundation of the method, and I hope they will help you too.

1. Place

Create a sacred space, and practice in the same place every time. If you practice at a yoga studio, simply going to the studio is enough; you don't need to occupy the same spot on the floor every day. But if you practice at home, it is crucial to create a dedicated space for your practice, even if it is just one small corner of a small apartment. Place a photo of your teacher in front of your mat so you are reminded of him or her when you practice. When I practice at home, I see the photos of my teachers and am inspired to practice. Sometimes I pretend that Guruji is in the room with me, which definitely motivates me. If you have the space, you might even leave your mat unrolled all the time, to claim the space for practice instead of for other things in your life. It is ideal to have a room that you can devote entirely to yoga, but not everyone has that luxury. Just the space of a yoga mat can be a precious resource, so setting it up can claim the space as an altar to the spiritual intention within yourself and your life. Especially on days when you don't feel

like practicing, just go and stand on your yoga mat at your scheduled practice time and see what happens. If the energy is strong in that spot, it will pull you forward into the practice. If you change into your yoga clothes at the time you have set for your practice and stand on your mat, the attraction to practice will be even stronger. Sometimes just wearing yoga clothes will help you get in practice mode.

2. Time

Practice as close to the same time every day as possible. The more you can make your practice part of your daily routine, the easier it will be to practice consistently. If it is not possible to practice at the same time every day, then set a weekly schedule. Make appointments on your calendar for yoga practice and stick to them. Setting the time helps to ritualize your behavior, and you will expend less energy keeping to the discipline of daily practice.

3. Include

Share your motivations for practicing with your family or housemates. Including other people in your journey will encourage them to support your practice. Having the respect of your family and friends is helpful, because it means that yoga is integrated into the big picture of your daily life.

4. Acceptance

Let go of the "all or nothing" idea. If you have only five minutes a day, use that time to practice. Many people will not practice unless they can do a full ninety-minute session. Taking that much time is certainly important, especially when you begin the Intermediate Series, because the practice gets longer and longer. But there will be days when your time is limited, and it is not useful to skip practice if you only have twenty minutes. As little as five minutes a day gives you the chance to do at least a few Sun Salutations and maintain the continuity of your practice. Particularly if you're feeling overwhelmed with the Intermediate Series, it is important that you at least maintain some aspect of daily practice, even if you do not have the time or energy to complete every posture. A little yoga is better than no yoga.

5. Inspiration

Seek out classes, teachers, workshops, retreats, trainings, books, videos, and social media for inspiration. Join a class whenever you can with a teacher who inspires you. Travel if necessary to take intensives and immersions. Follow teachers and yoga practitioners who inspire and support your journey on social media (YouTube and Instagram are great home practice supports).

6. Discipline

Be disciplined with yourself. Hold yourself to a certain standard, and be your own coach when you practice solo. A great way to be disciplined with yourself is to assign yourself a project for your practice and focus on that. When you are working on backbends, it can be especially hard to figure out exactly what to do each day. It is best to have a routine that you do every day without question. That routine is best set by a qualified teacher, but if you do not have access to a teacher, assign yourself a project that you will do every day for at least one month. For example, your routine could be to engage your pelvic floor strongly each time you extend your spine or to repeat Kapotasana three times every day. At the end of the allotted time, evaluate the success of the project, and either continue it or move on to a new one. Do not go crazy and assign yourself too many projects, or you will get overwhelmed. I never have more than one project per practice, which allows me the freedom to experience the flow of the practice spontaneously.

7. Goals

Set small, attainable goals on which you focus during each practice. This goal-setting is part of a healthy mental training and will be explained in greater detail in the introduction to the backbends segment of the Intermediate Series. If you can't get yourself motivated to practice, do not force yourself to do everything. Just set a small goal for that day's session. For example, on a day when you would rather stay in bed, tell yourself that you will do at least ten minutes. Once you succeed at the small goal, ask yourself if you want to stop or do more. Usually succeeding at the small goal builds momentum, and you will want to do a little more. Another example is the

simple requirement of staying in each posture for five breaths. For poses that are very challenging, such as Karandavasana, staying for a full five breaths can be daunting. So you might assign yourself an even smaller goal, such as staying for two breaths. When you succeed at that, you can increase to three breaths and so on until you reach the full five breaths. Small successes generate further interest and energy for the practice.

8. Record

Keep a daily log to chart the course of your practice. Make it easy, like an app on your phone that clicks each time you practice or a calendar note. If you keep a log of how many days you spend doing yoga, you can add them up at the end of the year and acknowledge the work you've put in. I haven't found a good yoga app that helps, but maybe I'll develop something one day.

Another way to chart your course is to take before and after photos of yourself in the asana that is most challenging for you. Since you will be doing the posture every day, you might not feel the progress because you are down in the trenches of your own inner battles. However, when viewed from the perspective of many months or years of practice, physical progress is usually evident. Taking a photo once every three to six months will help you verify the forward movement that might not be obvious from your inner experience.

9. Forgiveness

Do not beat yourself up when you don't practice or when you feel that a session was a train wreck. Just be grateful that you have a home practice, and give yourself the span of your lifetime to practice yoga. Practice being grateful and you will actually train your mind to think more appreciative thoughts. Through the mirror of yoga, you experience the natural fluctuations of the body and mind. Some days, your body will feel flexible; other days, it will be tight. Some days, your body will feel strong and other days, weak. Sometimes, your mind will be calm and clear; other times, it will be disturbed and distracted. Your job is not to be bothered by the fantastic display in the field of your experience. Watch with objectivity, cultivate curiosity for the present moment, turn up, and do your practice every day. Do not hold on to

the good times or fight to remove the bad. Just be exactly where you are and trust that it is exactly where you need to be.

The Inner Work of Yoga

THE DAILY PRACTICE OF ASHTANGA YOGA IN THE TRADITION of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, combined with deep breathing based on the Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath), equates to both strength training and cardiovascular exercise. But to engage in Ashtanga Yoga with the specific aim of getting a good workout is missing the true goal of the practice—unless what you intend to "work out" is the power of your mind.

Tapas is a Sanskrit word for the austerities undertaken by spiritual practitioners for the sake of furthering their development. For the contemporary Ashtanga Yoga student, tapas can be understood as the pain that leads to purification. However, this is not merely the muscular burn that you feel in certain postures. While the muscles do need to strengthen and you can expect some burning sensations, the true burn is the inner spiritual fire that breaks through old habit patterns of the mind. The Sanskrit word for the impressions left on the field of the mind is *samskaras*. These aggregate and form larger behavioral patterns that are called *vasanas*. The deeper aim of Ashtanga Yoga is to burn through the negative behavioral patterns and reveal the truth of the inner being. When tapas enter the higher consciousness, the result is the light of spiritual awakening, known as *viveka*, or wisdom. This wisdom is the lamp of knowledge that illuminates the journey within. While physical poses are a tool toward this end, the inner awakening is the true purpose of yoga practice.

The guide to the inner work in the Ashtanga Yoga method comes from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, a two-thousand-year-old text composed of 196 aphorisms organized into four sections, or "books." When you are embarking on the journey of the Intermediate Series, the Yoga Sutras are a valuable reference. Many of the obstacles you will encounter while practicing the intense postures are mentioned in the sutras. Seeing the emotional reactions catalogued by Patanjali more than two thousand years ago can give you confidence that you are embarking on a time-honored journey.

In the classic work of Patanjali, the mind is likened to an ocean of awareness called *citta*, and the waves on this ocean of awareness—such as thoughts and sense perceptions—are *vrttis*. When you engage in a sensory experience, it creates a vrtti (wave) on your citta (mind). These waves are what leave an impression (samskara), which when repeated creates a deep groove in the fabric of the mind (vasana). This then conditions your behavior. Working with these behavioral patterns is the purification aspect of the Ashtanga Yoga method.

In Yoga Sutra, 1.5, Patanjali identifies two types of waves or experiences: painful (*klishta*) and nonpainful (*aklishta*). Klishta vrttis generate negative karma, further spin the wheel of suffering, and dig destructive patterns deeper into your being. Using the metaphor of the ocean of your mind, these waves can capsize boats, harm innocent beings, and destroy things. Aklishta vrttis are the type of gentle waves that do no damage to you or others. These are the calm dawn waves that caress the shore the morning after a storm. These healing waves cause no pain in the ocean of your mind. Sometimes we need to go through the storm to clear out the source of the klishta vrttis so that we can experience and appreciate more fully the presence of aklishta vrttis.

In the daily practice of the Intermediate Series, your emotions will be as changeable as a tropical summer day. There might be sunshine in a clear blue sky just before a big storm suddenly arises out of nowhere. There may be thunder and lightning one minute, and peace and calm the next. There is no meteorological report for our emotional weather! The emotional lesson of the Intermediate Series is to realize the temporal nature of emotions themselves and to cultivate a watchful consciousness that is tempted neither to fight against negative emotions nor to hold on to positive ones. Just as you cannot change the weather to fit your personal preferences, you cannot change your emotional state. You can, however, change your reaction to the weather and your response to your emotional storms. If you simply wait out the storm, the promise of the Ashtanga Yoga method is that one day you will experience the deep peace of your true self.

BURNING THROUGH OBSTACLES

The samskaras are habit patterns of the mind that have been practiced and repeated so often that they run on autopilot, unconsciously generating the same cyclical types of interactions in the world. As mentioned earlier, there are positive and negative behavioral patterns, but it is primarily the negative patterns that the yoga of purification addresses. A common analogy for negative samskaras likens them to almonds planted in the field of consciousness; when they are given the fertile ground of attachment and aversion, they ultimately bear the fruit of suffering. However, do not think of the samskaras as "things" out there that act out and harm us. Instead, the samskaras are latent subliminal impressions that result from our experiences. Our actions can be called our karmas, and these leave the samskara impressions that give rise to the larger patterns of attraction and aversion known as the vasanas. We then take further action based on these, generating more karma. This cycle can be called the vritti-samskara-chakra.

The cycle is that impressions give rise to desire, and desire leads to action. Action leads to impressions. All of that together is part of *avidya* (delusion) and the root of suffering. The main purpose of all spiritually oriented yoga practices is a concentrated effort to break this cycle through the fire of purification. You need to know three important things about these samskaras when embarking on the inner journey of yoga. First, your personal storyline —the narrative of "you"— generally feeds the already established patterns. Second, the more you fight and struggle against them head-on, the worse they get, sort of like a constrictor snake. And third, the samskaras pull you down like a riptide into the sea of emotionality until you can feel like you are drowning. This is what happens in a relapse, a kind of slippery recidivism that pulls you down just when you think you are past a particular issue.

In some ways, the samskaras are like addictions. But instead of being addicted to a substance, you get addicted to a particular emotional state that, while it might be pleasant or exciting, ultimately leads to suffering and pain. The samskaras have a feeling of familiarity; they are what you know, and that familiarity is their temptation. The pattern is so well established, and you are unconsciously so attached to it, that it actually hurts to let it go. The more you unknowingly let the negative samskaras fuel your life course, the deeper they pull you into their destructive spiral.



Diagram by Eddie Stern.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras say that the practice of yoga offers the only definitive way out of this cycle. Instead of fighting the samskaras from an antagonistic place, the practice of yoga seeks to burn through them with the light of pure awareness. This is done with both physical and spiritual practices that cultivate the fire of purification (*agni*). Once the inner agni is ignited, it has the power to fry the negative samskara almonds until only their shells remain, and they no longer have the ability to grow and bear their painful fruit.

Continuing the analogy of the samskaras as almonds, when they start to burn, you can expect two things to happen within your body. First, since you are identified with the samskara almonds, you may experience emotional anguish when they start to burn. Second, since they are rooted within the the field of the body, when they begin to burn their presence may be accompanied by physical pain.

When you practice yoga and delve deep within yourself, you may see the ways your negative samskaras have harmed you and the people in your life. Once you see the pattern clearly, you are likely to want to make amends for the suffering you have generated through the familiar pattern of the samskaras. The fire of purification in the practice of yoga is also, ultimately, the light of clarity. Recognizing the negative samskaras' effect in your life may very well break your heart. It can sometimes feel like seeing the truth after a long period of denial. The tender, achy quality of your heart often opens in the moment you fully realize the effect of your samskaras, because you see clearly how your actions have harmed those you love and you feel empathy for their pain. In that moment of direct revelation, you will probably also yearn to go and apologize for the harm you have caused and be inspired to make a firm resolution never to repeat that same pattern again. You do not need to know where the patterns come from; you just need to reveal them within the light of pure awareness to purify them with the power of agni.

The best yogis are not the ones who are perfect from day one, but those who see the patterns of suffering they have contributed to and then work tirelessly to burn through those negative samskaras every day of their lives. A big step on the way to living a more peaceful life is to transform negative samskaras into positive ones. Yoga Sutra 1.33 gives clear direction on how to live according to yogic values from the emotional perspective. Patanjali states that friendliness (maîtri) and compassion (karuna) are two important states of mind that yoga practitioners can actively cultivate when they strive to burn through their negative samskaras. By consciously seeking to establish the flow of consciousness in friendliness toward the happy and compassion toward the unhappy, the yogi builds the foundations of a healed life. Patanjali further presents joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekshanam) as keys to the yogic state of mind. We should cultivate joy toward the virtuous and equanimity in the presence of the wicked. Reacting strongly against people we categorize as "the enemy" and the source of our suffering is a big hook for our own samskaras. Patanjali asks yoga students to remain neutral when their personal preferences against someone are triggered. In this way, students will at least not generate even more seeds of suffering for themselves. If, instead of caving in to your negative behavior patterns each time you feel the tug to lash out in aggression, fall into depression, or give in to anxiety, you pause long enough to break the cycle, you may then be able to go one step further and practice a more positive, healing vibration. In the challenging postures of the Intermediate Series, you will have ample opportunities to experience the negative samskaras and practice cultivating an attitude of friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity toward yourself and others.

ENERGETICS

Traditional yoga philosophy holds that there are five layers, or sheaths, in our being. These are called the five *koshas*:

- 1. Annamaya (physical) kosha = food, the physical body, the five elements
- 2. *Pranamaya* (energy) *kosha* = breath, the vital body, the five pranas
- 3. *Manomaya* (mental) *kosha* = impressions, the outer mind, the five kinds of sensory impressions
- 4. *Vijnanamaya* (wisdom) *kosha* = ideas, intelligence, directed mental activity
- 5. *Anandamaya* (bliss) *kosha* = experiences, the deeper mind, bliss, memory, the subliminal and superconscious mind

Within the pranamaya kosha, there are five pranas stemming from the one primary prana and defined by their movement and action. One of the main ways that the Ashtanga Yoga method purifies deep-seated behavioral patterns is by working with these five pranas through the tools of asana, breath, and focal point. Prana can also be generally understood as your life energy, the spirit or grace that courses through your body and mind.

These five pranas, which are sometimes referred to collectively as *prana vayu*, are known as *prana*, *apana*, *udana*, *samana*, and *vyana*, according to the Upanishads and classic Ayurveda. These are well-known aspects of yoga. Prana can be defined as "that which moves inward" and includes inhalation, eating, and receiving mental and sensory stimuli. It generates and drives energy and exists from the head down to the navel. Apana can be defined as "that which moves downward," including elimination and reproduction. It cleanses and releases and exists from the navel down to the root chakra. Udana is defined as "upward or transformational energy," which includes standing, speaking, and willpower. It transforms and evolves and

moves from the navel up to the head. Samana is a balancing energy that can move things into the center, including the activities of digestion and metabolism. It controls movement from the whole body back toward the navel. Vyana moves things from the center outward and includes circulation and movement; as such, it assists the other pranas. It can be said to control energy from the navel outward to the entire body.

With this as a philosophical basis, there are three key patterns to note in the practice of the Intermediate Series: the pranic pattern, the apanic pattern, and the center line. I was introduced to this concept by senior certified Ashtanga teacher, Richard Freeman. His poetic interpretation about how the pranas might be expressed is extremely useful on the inner journey. Prana and apana are related to inhalation and exhalation—so, by proxy, inhalation is related to extension and exhalation to flexion. In yoga therapy, these ideas are linked to curing disease or imbalance and choosing appropriate postures to help bring balance. The Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga works intensively with the pranic and apanic patterns. It asks the student to master both and then progress to dynamic poses that flow between them with fluidity and speed. Imbalance that skews toward the pranic or apanic state often leads to injury.

As it is expressed in asana, the pranic pattern is an uplifting, outwardflowing pattern that relates to bringing energy up the spine. It is an extroverted energy pattern that is oriented outward toward the world and is associated with opening your heart and stretching. Metaphorically, the pranic pattern has been described as opening your heart to grace. Backbends are particularly good for stimulating the pranic pattern. Prana is life and energy, and it awakens heat and fire when triggered. You can think of the pranic pattern as spinal extension, although that is a little too simplistic to explain its full power and depth. The pranic pattern is also oriented toward the future. Overactivation of this pattern can lead to megalomania, hyperpranic states like mania, an inability to say no or set boundaries, and overstretching.

The apanic pattern is the opposite. Instead of orienting outward, it orients inward. Instead of lifting up, it roots down. It is related to spinal flexion and deep strength in the body and mind. Metaphorically, this pattern is like containing grace within yourself. The pranic pattern is often oriented toward
the past. Overactivation of the apanic pattern includes an inability to let go of the past, emotional shutdown, overprotectionism, and fear.

Finally, the center line is related to the experience of perfect balance that can only be attained in the present moment. It is something you slip into, like a peaceful meditation. The center line is not something you can force, but when it occurs, it indicates that the energy of your body is flowing along the central axis and your mind is rooted in the present moment. In many ways, all the work that we do in yoga is to create those precious moments when we slip into this harmonious state. Metaphorically, the center line shines like a sun, equally and harmoniously, between the future and the past. Orientation toward the center line is a timeless state filled with ease and flow. If you maintain diligent practice of the Intermediate Series, you will be putting in the work that leads toward balancing prana and apana along the center line.

DISCOVER THE PRESENT MOMENT

Once you start the Intermediate Series, you will enter deeply into the Ashtanga Yoga method. On the long and winding road of self-awakening, take a moment to recognize how remarkably far you have come. Do not be discouraged by the fact that there are four more series of postures to go in the complete Ashtanga Yoga method. Take stock of the power of the present moment and embrace where you are. Do not let yourself get attached to acquiring more poses or learning them in any particular time frame. Just do the practice and surrender attachment to the fruits of your labor to a power higher than yourself. In this state of surrender, you will be free to do real yoga work.

I spent about ten years in a mad rush to go as far as I could in the Ashtanga method. In many ways, I carried the paradigm of future orientation, a deep samskara in my mind, into my yoga practice. As modern citizens of a soundbite world, we are conditioned to exist in one mad, multitasking rush. This constant need to get somewhere special and do something unique as fast as possible orients our whole mind-set to future thinking. While setting goals is useful (something I still do this regularly), if taken to an extreme, it can cause unnecessary stress and expectations while depriving us of the beauty of the "now." Daily yoga practice demands that you remain awake and alert while feeling your body. Presence in yoga is centered in the reality of the body, because the body does not and cannot lie or deceive in the same way as the mind. If you are experiencing stress, the body registers that experience. While the mind can deny what the body is experiencing, the body cannot. Ashtanga Yoga uses the simple clarity of the body as a means to bring the mind into the present. Rather than just dictating actions to the body, the deepest yoga practice teaches the mind how to listen to the body in the pure light of awareness, without judgment or expectation, without generating any future seeds of samskaras.

Allowing your mind to be in a relaxed, open state is generally easier when you feel good but harder when you experience pain. In fact, pain in all its shapes and sizes is so unpleasant that there is an automatic tendency to avoid it. Pain, whether physical, emotional, or mental, can cause us to orient immediately toward the avoidance of all future potentially painful experiences. This aversion is itself a source of misery, because it chains the consciousness both to the past at the first experience of pain and to the future avoidance of pain. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the challenging postures of the Intermediate Series.

You cannot control life, and no matter how much you want everything to be light, free, and easy, you cannot escape the truth that sometimes life is hard, heavy, and labored. If you run from every negative experience based on memories from the past, you essentially allow the past to dictate the present and the future. The Ashtanga Yoga method asks you to stop running away from painful experiences and accept the reality of the present moment, whether it is painful or pleasurable.

One of the most basic lessons of yoga practice is to break the attachment to any particular outcome. When you surrender your need for the present moment to be a certain way, you are free to experience it as it is. The field of the body is the first place where you learn to experience life from this perspective. Your body will never feel exactly the same from day to day or even hour to hour. As a student of yoga, you are asked to accept the inevitability of this change. When, for example, your hip is tight, you accept that the hip is tight and learn to practice without any attachment to the goal of opening your hip. If you try to force your hip into opening, you may injure one of the delicate joints of your body, such as your knee. Instead, the Ashtanga Yoga method teaches you to experience the present moment as it naturally unfolds in the field of your own body. By accepting the tightness in your hip in a state of peace, you are cultivating the same attitude that accepts difficulty when it arises in life without losing the peaceful center within yourself.

The humble task of Ashtanga Yoga is not to get anywhere, but to stay "here," focused on the sensation of the breath, posture, and focal point, to calm the mind and experience the reality of what is. If you set your mind on a goal in the future, whether that is two asanas away or two years away, your mind is not fully present. Through the tools of your daily practice, yoga slowly burns away the paradigm of rushing toward a goal. By practicing yoga every day, you walk the nonlinear path of presence and learn to accept the now. This state does not mean you cannot visualize your future and still be at peace. But if you let your attainment of a certain posture be the sole reason you practice yoga, you will take yourself out of the present moment.

One of the most confusing and paradoxical truths about the journey of yoga (and perhaps life) is that all the joy, happiness, and freedom we are searching for out there in the future is actually right here and now. All we need to do is relax the mind enough to experience it as it really is.

THE BRAVE HEART OF A YOGI

There may be nothing more heartrending than the sound of a suffering animal. It is the raw expression of pain that cracks empathy right open. When you feel like a small, suffering animal in your practice or your life, it is tempting to try to avoid the pain. However, the Ashtanga Yoga method asks you to train your inner animal to work with certain types of pain on the road to purification. If you quit each time your inner animal suffers, then you will quit on every hard and challenging pose.

We all have our sounds of suffering, whether it's a grunt, a whimper, or an exhalation through the mouth. Or it may not be a sound at all, but just a slouchy posture or a pouting face. When these arise as a knee-jerk reaction to what you experience and you allow that reaction to guide your actions, then the pattern has a dangerous hold over you. It is, in essence, a deep samskara

that has developed into a vasana. Once these patterns take root, they run on automatic pilot in your citta. The lesson of the Intermediate Series is about gaining control over the nervous system when you stand in the face of panic, pain, stress, and challenge. In this way, yoga trains the mind to face adversity with a balanced emotional state.

If you have energy to make noise, then you have energy to redirect to the posture or movement. Instead of just releasing the potency of the moment in a sound, try to direct your energy to the inner body and use the urgency of the moment to dive deeper within. What you do when faced with these feelings will largely determine how well you are able to adapt and move forward in your life. If you collapse, quit, give up, and give in to the suffering animal inside rather than train your mind to be steady and calm in the face of pain or danger, then you are setting yourself up for failure. To work through painful and difficult circumstances, the mind must learn how to be strong, balanced, clear, and compassionate. You may find your greatest test in the Intermediate Series.

I am not above all this. As a student of yoga, I experienced this testing repeatedly. More recently, as I was learning the Ashtanga Yoga Fourth Series, a pose called Parivrttasana (Turning Round and Round Posture) A and B pushed me to the point of doubt, panic, confusion, and pain. The suffering animal inside me cried out. Parivrttasana A and B broke my conception of spatial orientation, challenged what I believed possible for my body, disturbed my breathing, and destroyed the boundaries of what I thought the practice is. I could never have done it without being guided by my teacher, R. Sharath Jois, in Mysore.

When I first did these two poses, I remember literally not knowing up from down, right from left, inhalation from exhalation, and feeling only fear, panic, and uncertainty. To be honest, sometimes when practicing alone, I used to let myself grunt and whine a bit. But the intensive movement of Parivrttasana A and B has strengthened my back and evened out my slight scoliosis. Learning this movement brought up deep emotions that sometimes frightened me, but I kept going, and now I feel much more clarity. You may experience something equally intense when confronting the deep backbends of the Intermediate Series. Yoga is the process of training the mind to remain steady through whatever arises and, through that freedom, to gain control over the direction and flow of consciousness. Emotionality in the practice is a test. Asana practice generates a kind of synthetic stress that gives you the opportunity to train your nervous system in how to respond to moments of true stress in your life.

In the backbends of the Intermediate Series, many students feel a shortening of breath, a tightening of the airway, an inability to breathe, and an ensuing panic that brings them out of the posture. Some people might say that this means the student should not do the pose. But the Ashtanga Yoga method is about learning to balance the mind so that it meets pleasure and pain, attachment and aversion, with the same steadiness. If you run from the difficult places, especially those that are related to difficulty with breathing, there will always be something from which you need to run. If you can maintain the balance of your mind and steadily walk through the inner work that trains the consciousness to be singular and focused, you will feel the power of the yoga practice at work.

In the physical yoga practice, you must remember to find the balance of opposing forces in every posture and movement. There is no inward rotation without a counterbalancing outward force. There is no strength without softness, just as there is no happiness without sadness. Every pose contains this tightrope walk across the abyss of human emotion. In the first breath of the Sun Salutations, you raise your arms by externally rotating your shoulders while simultaneously following the inward energetic spiral to bring your hands toward each other. Each asana contains various actions and counteractions that seek to create balance and use opposing forces. Physical balance is a dynamic state created by the perfect equalization of two opposing forces that is accompanied by mental harmony and peace.

The beautiful postures of yoga are not an end in themselves. The real teaching of the path of yoga is to use asana as a way to gain perspective on deeper life patterns. Like a ladder you can climb to lift yourself out of the emotional chaos of your life, the practice of asana gives you a much-needed clear view. Instead of sitting in the midst of cycles of suffering without seeing a way out, when you practice yoga, you gain the power of clear perception, a kind of microscopic vision that magnifies your issues so you can see them more clearly and completely. It is that broadened perspective of the ups and

downs—the suffering, joy, failures, and successes—of life that makes asana meaningful. Instead of running from pain, the yogi accepts tapas, the mental, physical, and emotional pain associated with daily practice. It is a long-standing tradition in the world of yoga to submit yourself to certain pains when they arise instead of running away in search of pleasure. Only in that stable place of strength can the true yogi's mind be cultivated.

DIRGHA KALA (A LONG TIME)

If you start practicing with an emphasis on the immediate realization of the more physical goals, like getting into Kapotasana, balancing in Pinchamayurasana (Forearm Balance/Feathered Peacock Pose), or other posturedriven results, then yoga can be a bit daunting. Sometimes a strong push to force the body into achieving fast results can lead to a debilitating injury that takes years to heal. When a student experiences a yoga-related injury, it may bring up doubt regarding the efficacy of the practice. Rushing toward any goal in the Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga is ill-advised.

In fact, it could be argued that rushing along the path of yoga toward a goal defeats the deeper spiritual purpose of the discipline. Pushing the physical body too hard can be counterproductive to the very goal that you believe you are rushing toward. The key to a sustainable yoga practice includes the wisdom to allow your body to grow, evolve, and change over days and years. It is my sincere wish that you never experience a yoga-related injury and that, if you do, it heals quickly and retrains your body to be healthier in the long run.

Guruji would often quote Yoga Sutra 1.14 when students expressed impatience with the progress of their yoga practice and wondered how long they needed to practice before results would appear. Translated from the Sanskrit, this sutra states that yoga practice becomes well established when attended to for a long time, without break, and in all earnestness. *Dirgha* means "long," and *kala* means "time"; this is the time frame to which we can expect to commit ourselves before we see measurable, sustainable results from our practice. The notion of time expressed in this sutra is not minutes, hours, months, or even years. Rather, it is best thought of as epochs of history, or lifetimes.

One interpretation of dirgha kala in this context is that the minimum amount of time it takes to experience the true benefits of yoga is one entire human lifetime. Guruji would often say exactly this, that the practice of yoga requires at least one full lifetime before the benefits start to accrue. (Of course, this refers to the deeper, spiritual blessings of yoga, not to the more practical benefits of better health, clarity of mind, increased energy, and all the rest that we start to enjoy from the early days of our practice.) If you can accept the noncontemporary notion that you will experience true benefit only after a lifetime of practice, you can set yourself free from the intense urgency to attain any posture or result now! You can humbly set your mind to daily practice and sustain the heart of yoga over the course of your entire life, releasing any need to get somewhere today, tomorrow, or within any specific time frame. In essence, yoga is a call to the present moment that surrenders all memory of the past and projection into the future for results that are attained or attainable someday. At the same time, yoga suggests that eternity is the true time frame for practice, and the eternality of the soul across countless incarnations creates ample space to reap the highest benefits of yoga practice.

Think about the time it takes to master any technique or discipline: commitment, devotion, and dedication over many years are necessary prerequisites. It takes nearly a decade, if not more, for a person to become a medical doctor, a concert violinist, or an expert in any field. When you practice yoga, you are learning to become an expert at inner awareness. This field of study requires as much patience and steady dedication as any other field. Most people would consider it unsafe, to say the least, if you wanted to operate on your first day of medical school. In yoga practice, you can think of attempting advanced poses and complicated breathing techniques before you are ready in the same way. Beginners need the humility to enter the practice where they are and as they are, and start there, releasing any frustration, expectation, or need to be somewhere that seems more advanced. When you embark on the Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga, think of it as beginning a graduate school program for advanced yoga studies. Let it take the time it takes; do not rush the process of learning.

Surrendering the results of your yoga practice to the time frame of your life requires you to relinquish control to a force much larger and grander than

your individual ego. To think of your practice in eternal terms, where one lifetime is merely a drop in the sea of time, creates humility. Freedom from the cycle of suffering is not something that can be gained in a casual afternoon of shopping and coffee. It is the slow, steady perseverance over countless hours, days, and even lifetimes that leads to the moment of release. On a smaller scale, the lesson that we can integrate into our practice today is one of patience and perspective.

When I started practicing yoga, I had no idea about the deeper philosophical notions of reincarnation, self-realization, or eternal truth. When I started the Intermediate Series, I wanted to balance on my arms and get into postures that were not easy for me. I felt an urgency about mastering challenging poses that sometimes obscured the deeper work that yoga demands. The more frustrated, furious, or self-deprecating I was toward myself, the further away the end result that I wanted actually became.

One thing that became evident through my first meeting with Guruji was that yoga is not something that is measured by the mastery of postures; it is measured by the depth of your inner devotion. In Yoga Sutra 1.14, nairantarya means "without break," and this means that yoga as a lifelong practice must transform your entire life both on and off the yoga mat. Committing yourself to practice every day—whether it feels good, bad, fun, painful, rewarding, boring, or enlightening-is an essential part of the devotional relationship with the practice. If you are willing and able to surrender the results of the practice to the devotional relationship with the inner body, then you will align your intention with the deepest promise of yoga. If you want everything right now in this moment, then you often sacrifice heavily to "get there." If your goal is more diffuse and related not to the perfection of physical form but to inner peace, then the effortful approach that might harm your joints can ease into a state of relaxation, and you can practice every day of your life. Devotion is something you cultivate in the practice. It is devotion first to yourself, then to your teacher and the method, and ultimately to the Divine.

Once you become aware of the true intention of yoga practice, you can realign your purpose around it. Yoga Sutra 1.14 states that students must put their whole heart into the practice if the deeper goal of yoga, self-realization, is to be attained. *Satkarasevito* means "in all earnestness," and once yoga practitioners get a glimpse of the deeper aim of yoga, they must evaluate their intention to determine whether they truly want to commit to the lifelong spiritual practice at yoga's core. If you just practice for fun or entertainment, then you will not reach the final goal, and when you meet adversity, boredom, or one of the inevitable obstacles encountered along the spiritual path, you will turn away. In my experience, students who understand their yoga practice as a path to the realization of the divinity within have the faith, strength, and perseverance it takes to practice for many years.

There is no end to the journey of yoga. Each practice session offers you a new chance to realize ever deeper levels of your inner self. The goal of yoga is the eternal truth hidden under the manifest world and the final realization of sacredness. There is no need to rush to eternity because it will always be there. With devotion, all who practice yoga will find the strength it takes to truly embody the spiritual path.

The Sound of Sacred Space—Opening and Closing Prayers

EACH ASHTANGA YOGA PRACTICE SESSION OPENS AND closes with a prayer that is traditionally chanted in Sanskrit. The opening invocation is used to set the spiritual intention of the practice and create a sacred space. The closing prayer is a heart-opening practice that asks for peace among all beings. While commonly known as the opening and closing mantras, they are technically not mantras, which are the sacred words that occur in the *rishis*' (seers') ancient, revealed teachings known as the Vedas. The opening prayer is partially attributed to the Advaita Vedanta teacher Adi Shankaracharya, and the closing prayer comes from a corpus of traditional prayers called the *svasti vachakam* (auspicious sayings).

For the Ashtanga Yoga student, the prayers consist of magical, exotic sounds that transport the heart and mind into the realm of yoga. Using the power of sound rather than language, the opening and closing invocations create a state that transcends their literal definitions. Much like listening to classical music can open your heart and mind in a way that transcends your logical mind, these prayers open a window into your spiritual journey through Ashtanga Yoga.

I will never forget the first time I heard the Ashtanga Yoga opening invocation. Not only was the syllable OM transformational in itself, but the call-and-response way of chanting the words of the opening and closing prayers unlocked something ineffable inside me. I recognize the same feeling whenever I ask new students to repeat the opening invocation after me in their first Ashtanga Yoga class. Only by surrendering the logical mind and opening the heart can these strange new sounds really be reflected back from the heart of the student. If you overthink each sound, it will be impossible to repeat after the teacher. Instead, allow the resonance and vibration to emanate from deep within yourself. After years of practice, you will naturally get better at pronunciation, but at first let go of perfection and just open your heart.

Even when you practice alone, it is important that you integrate these chants into your daily practice. The chants are traditionally done while standing in Samsthiti (Equal Standing) with your hands in prayer position (see fig. 3.1). You do not need to sing them at top volume; instead, allow the chants to rest within your heart center. When working on pronunciation, it is best to learn the chants directly from a teacher. However, if you are attempting to learn the chants merely from reading, here is an easy way to work with the transliteration of Sanskrit: one vowel or group of vowels plus one consonant or group of consonants creates one sound. Since the purpose of transliteration is to create a phonetic spelling, there is no need to look at the word and know how to pronounce it directly. You can literally sound it out, following the diacritical markings for proper accents, much as you would when reading Spanish or other languages.

Each of these prayers starts off with OM intoned by everyone present, ideally in harmony. While not every class succeeds at generating the harmony, when it does happen, the only way to describe the harmonization of voices is sacred. More than just a note in a song, the syllable OM symbolizes divinity itself. It is traditionally said that when chanted with reflection on its meaning, the sound invokes the presence of the divine within. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras state that OM represents the embodiment of divinity beyond all forms. Also called *tasya vachaka pranavah* (Yoga Sutra 1.27), OM signifies Ishvara, who is the seer within, the transcendent teacher of the ancients. Rather than a specific deity, it represents this primordial divine force.



Figure 3.1

The sound OM has four parts that flow together. Sometimes spelled AUM, it is nevertheless still sung as OM. The A represents the opening of the mouth and the waking state that is our common, shared experience. The U represents the dream state that is particular to each person and not shared in the mind of all. The M represents the closing of the lips and the end of all activities of the mind, including deep, dreamless sleep; introductory meditative states; and withdrawal of the senses from the outer world. The fourth component of OM is the resonance of the sound itself, which represents the final state of *samadhi* as complete absorption in meditative awareness. Taken together, these four aspects of OM also represent the four stages of life. The A represents birth, the U represents life, and the M represents death. The fourth state is said to be experienced only by yogis and is considered to be the meditative state of pure consciousness sometimes called the *turiya* state.

Beginning and ending each practice with the invocation of OM set the path that you will follow as a yoga practitioner. In that space, the following prayers take even deeper root within your heart. The opening prayer comes from a combination of two different sources, Shankaracharya's *Yoga Taravali*, a short text that teaches the inner meanings of pranayama and the nature of *kundalini* and is a traditional prayer to Patanjali. As is common with traditional prayers, we unfortunately do not really know where they come from, as they have been passed down and used in different places at different times. What is important is that while these prayers are certainly spiritual, they are not necessarily religious.

Rather than read them literally, read these prayers much like you would read a poem. Look for metaphors and use the prayers as a mirror with which to gaze within yourself. Included below is a line-by-line translation of the opening and closing prayers, along with my personal interpretation of their deeper meaning. Please do not take my interpretation to be absolute. Instead, allow it to add to the dialogue of your inner journey, just as you would turn on an additional light to brighten a dark room. I encourage you to create your own meaning and make these prayers your own.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE PRAYERS

The first line of the opening invocation begins with a statement of humility and deference to the wisdom of the teacher. The feet of the teacher are traditionally said to contain blessings, and at the end of each practice session with Guruji, I would touch his feet in this simple act of deference. By beginning the practice with this chant, students offer an expression of gratitude to the lineage of teachers that has provided the foundation for the practice. The guru can be defined as one who awakens consciousness and dispels the darkness.

The second line refers to the spiritual accomplishment of the guru, who contains joy and wisdom within while at the same time having the power to confer awakening within the heart of the student.

The next two lines are rich with the symbolism of the inner journey. Patanjali is presented as a jungle doctor who has the cure for the poison of conditioned existence, which stems from ignorance. In olden times in India, the jungle doctor was also called the *vaidya*, and each maharaja had his personal vaidya, who had knowledge of natural healing. Nowadays we are unlikely to need a jungle physician or live in an actual jungle; our jungle is the tangled web of thoughts within our minds. The accumulation of

samskaras creates a vast jungle through which we cannot see clearly. This interweaving tangle of thoughts, feelings, and memories determines our reality. Since Patanjali is the one who has found the way out of this inner turmoil, the method of yoga linked to his name and lineage is a kind of road map for the journey. With each practice, you can think of yourself as cutting away at the tangled network of illusion in the jungle of the mind. Each breath has the power to reveal a path forward out of the thick vegetation within. Once the path ahead is revealed, you can see reality clearly, and all illusion subsides.

In the second portion of the opening invocation, Patanjali is portrayed as an incarnation of the divine serpent Adisesa. His body is said to be half human and half serpent. The serpent has one thousand radiant white heads that bloom as a lotus over the *sahasrara chakra* (crown chakra). This symbolizes the full awakening of the state of samadhi that is the end goal of Ashtanga Yoga. Patanjali holds a sword, a conch, and a discus. These three items symbolize the spiritual battle that each yoga practitioner enters on the inner journey. They are weapons used to destroy obstacles along the spiritual path.

The sword has the power to cut through illusion and reveal reality clearly. It represents the code of dharma that exists as the fundamental goodness in every sentient being and rejects jungle or martial law.

The conch shell indicates the willingness of God to communicate with humanity. It relates to Shiva, who blows the conch at the end of his epic journey and was given the name Shiva Shankar (literally, Shiva the Conch Blower). The conch shell is also traditionally blown to initiate a battle. For example, Arjuna uses a conch as a battle horn in the Bhagavad Gita, and he is often depicted with the conch close to his mouth and with Krishna standing right beside him. The conch is also a symbol of victory, and its sound is used in Indian temples to summon auspiciousness. Patanjali's method gives us the chance to attain victory over the cycles of suffering in the inner battle between worldly pleasure/pain and divine nonattachment.

Finally, the discus is called the *sudarshan chakra*. *Chakra* means "wheel or disk," and Sudarshan is one of the many names for Krishna. The discus represents order, rhythm, and predictability as established by Vishnu. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, and he used the discus as a weapon to destroy evil and

produce an environment conducive to the growth of righteousness. The discus is often depicted moving in Krishna's hands. In the context of the opening invocation, the discus represents Patanjali's mastery over both time and karma.

The chant ends with a second prostration to signify the humility of the student toward the teacher and the lineage.

The closing chant is a heart-opening practice in which you ask for peace among all beings. Once you accumulate the good energy that comes from your practice, the purpose is not merely to feel better yourself, but to take the benefits of your yoga practice into your life. By praying for a more peaceful planet when you are finished with your practice, the clarity and vibrancy of your prayer will be more powerful and effective. Instead of simply developing yourself, the closing chant asks you to take your yoga beyond the confines of your mat.

Cows are a symbol of divinity, and their inclusion in the closing prayer is a reference to the divine. Brahmins are traditionally seen as the caretakers of divine knowledge on earth, and praying for their sustenance is akin to praying for the continuation of yogic knowledge in the world.

I present the prayers here in Sanskrit, transliteration, English, and a wordby-word explanation.

ASHTANGA YOGA OPENING PRAYER

ॐ वन्दे गुरूणां चरणारवन्दि सन्दर्शति स्वात्म सुखाव बोधे । नश्रिरेयसे जङ्गलकाियमाने संसार हालाहल मोहशांत्यै ॥ आबाहु पुरुषाकारं शंखचक्रास धारणिम् । सहस्र शरिसं श्वेतं प्रणमाम पितञ्जलमि् ॥ ॐ

vande gurūņam caraņāravinde sandaršita svātma sukhāva bodhe | niḥ śreyase jaṅgalikāyamāne samsāra hālāhala mohaśāntyai || ābāhu puruṣakāram śaṅkhacakrāsi dhāriṇam | sahasra śiraśam śvetam praṇamāmi patañjalim || I bow to the lotus feet of the Gurus

The awakening happiness of one's own Self revealed, Beyond better, acting like the Jungle physician, Pacifying delusion, the poison of Samsara.

Taking the form of a man to the shoulders, Holding a conch, a discus, and a sword, One thousand heads white, To Patanjali, I salute.

vande: I praise

gurūņam: of the gurus

caraṇāravinde: at the two lotus feet (Caraṇa = "foot, the root, the support of the venerable"; aravinda = "lotus.") *I praise at the lotus feet of the gurus*

sandarśita: awaken, manifest, reveal, shown *svātma:* one's own self (Sva = "own"; atman = "self.") *sukha:* joy, pleasure, happiness

- ava bodhe: being awakened, awakening perception, understanding who awaken the innate happiness of the supreme knowledge within one's own self
- *niḥ śreyase:* higher than the highest, beyond good (*Niḥ śreyase* is also sometimes used in relation to attaining the highest incomparable state of meditation/bliss and here it goes with the lotus feet of whomever made that possible. *Ni* is a prepositional phrase; *Sreyase* = "in/or/at bliss, happiness, most excellent.") *jangalikāyamāne:* jungle physician or doctor. (*Jangal* = "jungle, wild"; *kayamane* = "healer with knowledge of the plants and herbs of the jungle.") *samsāra:* conditioned existence, cycle of birth and rebirth *hālāhala:* snake, poison of samsara

moha: ignorance, misidentification, delusion śāntyai: pacifying

who pacifies the misidentification which comes from the poison of conditioned existence (identifying with prakrti).

ābāhu: arm

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puruṣakāraṁ: of a human form or shape (puruṣa or purusha = "the individual soul"; akāraṁ = "shape, form.") in the form of a man from his arm and up
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śańkha: conch (holds sound of pranava/OM) *cakra:* (or chakra) wheel, disc of time *asi:* sword of discrimination *dhāriņam:* holding *holding a conch, a discus, and a sword*

sahasra: thousands, infinite *śiraśam:* (or *sirsa*) head *śvetam:* white, bright, radiant *who has a thousand white heads* *praņam:* to bow, prostrate *āmi:* I *patañjalim:* Patanjali

ASHTANGA YOGA CLOSING PRAYER

स्वस्तपि्रजाभ्यः परपिालयंतां न्यायेन मार्गेण महीं महीशाः । गोब्राह्मणेभ्यः शुभमस्तु नत्ियं लोकाः समस्ताः सुखनिोभवंतु ॥ ॐ शान्ताः शान्ताः शान्ताः

svastiprajābhyaḥ paripālayantāṁ nyāyena mārgeṇa mahīṁ mahīśāḥ | gobrāhmaṇebhyaḥ śubhamastu nityaṁ lokāsamastā sukhinobhavantu || auṁ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

May all be well with humanity May the leaders of the earth protect all in every way by keeping to the right path. May there be goodness for those who know the earth to be sacred. May all the worlds be happy.

svasti: well-being, prosperity, success, blessing, good flow prajabhyah: for all mankind (praja = "mankind, all beings, generations.") paripālaya: governorship or guidance nyāyena: with justice mārgeņa: path, road, way, by, means of mahīm: the earth, the great world, country, land mahīsāḥ: rulers of the earth

may the prosperity of all beings be protected and guided may the rulers rule the earth by the means of universal law

go: cow; sense organs
brāhmaņebhyaḥ: of the brahmins
śubham: (or subha) welfare, auspicious, good fortune astu: let it be, let there be
nityaṁ: always, eternal, forever
lokā: all realms, worlds
samastā: all, total, whole
sukhino: happy
bhavantu: may it be (Bhu = "to be.")

may there always be good fortune for cows and Brahmins may all worlds/realms be happy

PART TWO

The Practice

Sun Salutations

KNOWN IN SANSKRIT AS THE SURYA NAMASKARA, THE SUN Salutations awaken the deep fire of purification that cleanses the body and clears the mind. A detail-oriented approach to your practice of these deceptively simple movements will help you understand how they form the basis for deep backbends, powerful handstands, and hip opening. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois always said that the entire yoga practice is contained within the format of the Sun Salutations—if they are practiced properly. Keep your mind open to their deeper lessons, and they will lead you to a more graceful and effortless practice.

If you merely perform the Sun Salutations by rote, a memorized activity while waiting to get to the fun poses later in your practice, then you have missed their essential lesson. Instead, rediscover your body and practice afresh each day; cultivate an attitude of appreciation in each practice and with each breath. Be open to what you may discover and experience within the field of your body.

Once you begin the Intermediate Series of Ashtanga Yoga, it is important to maintain conscious attention to the fundamentals so you can integrate all aspects of your practice. The series of Sun Salutations is basic and accessible to all levels of students, yet it also holds the keys to advanced postures. Focusing on healthy alignment, the inner energetics of the poses, and turning the mind inward keeps the Sun Salutations fresh regardless of how advanced your full asana practice is or how long you have been practicing.

The Sun Salutations kindle the inner fire of purification each time you practice. The quality of fire brings mental clarity and a precise inward focus of the mind. Since these are the first movements that every student of Ashtanga Yoga does, it is the perfect time to turn the mind inward, draw the senses toward the subtle body, and tune in to the present moment. The subtle

body comprises the subtle sensations of energy flow and internal cellular function that are accessible only through a refined and rarefied sensory capacity. On an even more literal level, the Sun Salutations contain the secret to every posture within the Ashtanga Yoga method, so whenever you have an advanced pose that seems unattainable, look to the Sun Salutations for hints on how your movement pattern may be inefficient.

The Power of Ashtanga Yoga contains a detailed breakdown of the alignment of each pose within the Sun Salutations; here, the analysis directs students of the Intermediate Series in their daily practice. The application of Mula Bandha and Uddiyana Bandha is crucial to the healthy practice of this series. Do not activate your pelvic floor only when you are approaching a challenging posture; rather, begin the activation of the bandhas from the first breath of the practice. Initiate every movement from this power center deep within your pelvis. Think about how every movement and every breath starts and ends from this point.

Considering each asana from the perspective of the bandhas awakens and trains the pelvic floor and moves you from the physical to the energetic practice. An example of the transition from the physical body to the energetic body is to think of the Sun Salutations as a careful movement between the tides of spinal extension and spinal flexion. Each breath represents one side of the shifting pendulum between turning outward and turning inward. This gentle rocking back and forth is modulated by the breath and the bandhas.



Figure 4.1

More than just a physical practice, the Sun Salutations create a balanced, meditative mind that abides in equanimity between the two opposing forces of flexion and extension. This is the basic lesson of the emotional journey of the Intermediate Series, and it is available within the movements of the Surya Namaskara. Please see the chart at the end of this chapter for the Sun Salutations.

All asanas are held for one breath, except Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose), which is held for five breaths in Sun Salutation A and for five breaths in Sun Salutation B the third time it is indicated in the flow.

The first breath of the practice, usually called one (*ekam*), sets the stage for healthy shoulder alignment in most inversions (see fig. 4.2). Every time you raise your arms above your head, you are essentially training the arms how to be in alignment for more challenging postures like Pinchamayurasana, Bakasana (Crane Pose), and Adho Mukha Vrksasana. Contained within this simple movement is also the ability to straighten your arms fully in Urdhva Danurasana and Kapotasana B. Whether you are in the first breath of *ekam*, Utkatasana (Chair Pose) as the first breath of the Sun Salutation B, or Virabhadrasana A (Warrior I), it is crucial that you maintain the same shoulder alignment that is described in this chapter.

Many students are given the instruction to draw their shoulder blades down their back when raising their hands above their head; however, this instruction is only the first step of the movement. Starting off with your arms down by your sides in Samsthiti (see fig. 4.1), first draw your shoulder blades down your back to create space around your neck. Then wrap your shoulder blades around toward the front of your body to activate the serratus anterior and rotator cuff muscles. Next send your arms and elbows forward, pressing the palms together. Activate your arm muscles and reach upward with your fingers. As you raise your arms, allow your shoulder blades to spiral forward, away from each other, and wrap around your torso. Once the forward shift with your hands and chest is complete, allow your shoulder blades to elevate while you draw your elbows toward each other as strongly as possible.

Do not stop when your arms are raised above your head in a vertical line with the rest of your body. Reach toward the ceiling with every bit of strength you have in your arms. Think about a swimmer's arms reaching forward to jump into the water and reach with the same intensity toward the ceiling or sky. Do not worry about keeping your shoulder blades drawn down your back —that is merely the starting point to ensure that your neck has space. Fully straighten your arms, press your elbows in toward each other, gently drop your head back, and look up toward your thumbs. Look for an active stretching and strengthening sensation in your deltoids and arms. Most students are hesitant to find the full reach through their arms because they are afraid of lifting their shoulder blades or dropping their head back. In fact, only this lifted arm position creates the space for the head to drop back safely. The neck position practiced here is the same one used for backbends, so it behooves you to start integrating the muscular activation here. Do not worry about whether your elbows are hyperextended or not; instead, focus on your reach and length. Since you are not bearing weight, there is no risk of injury. Additionally, connecting the activation of the body into the energy flow will protect your joints over the long term. You should eventually do this motion in one long inhalation that allows your arms to raise into position.



Figure 4.2

The next place of emphasis for Intermediate students is in the strength movement to and from Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend; see fig. 4.3). Activating the core and the shoulders to float or jump forward and back helps you develop the strength and steadiness necessary for the Intermediate Series. When initiating the motion to jump back from the third breath (*trini*) (see fig. 4.4), remember not to throw your body back. (Note that *trini* and *sapta* are the same position, and the differ only in the entry and exit into the posture.) Instead, firm your shoulder girdle, activate your core muscles, and lean your shoulders and chest forward over your palms. Jump your hips forward by engaging your pelvic floor, and send your hips over the stable foundation of your arms. Then exhale and land softly in Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose; see fig. 4.5). This movement is ideally learned with the assistance of a teacher who can emphasize the appropriate jump height and activation level.



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4







Figure 4.6



Figure 4.7

Jumping forward from Adho Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 4.7) is another place where you can practice the same neuromuscular activation. Instead of jumping forward to bend your knees in *sapta*, the seventh breath in Sun Salutation A, you can jump directly into Uttanasana without bending your knees by jumping into the support of your shoulders. To work on this, inhale as you jump forward, firming your shoulders and actively drawing your core muscles in toward the center line. Engage your arm muscles firmly as you allow your hips to drop and your chest to shift forward. This is the same position used to jump back into Chaturanga Dandasana, and it can be used for Sun Salutation A and B.



Figure 4.8

You do no need to try to do a handstand here. The purpose of this movement is merely to awaken the connection of your core and shoulders with the directional shift forward that forms the basis of strength throughout the whole practice. An additional benefit is the strengthening of your wrists; however, if you attempt a handstand, it may be too intensive and actually injure your wrists due to the lack of a proper warmup. Do *not* force yourself to jump into a handstand. Do the inner work of the movement that will give you the strength to jump through and back properly in the practice. This small emphasis will help you develop the necessary muscular strength to practice Bakasana B, Karandavasana, and other strength movements in the Intermediate Series.



Figure 4.9a



Figure 4.9b

Chaturanga Dandasana is a challenging pose that requires very strong shoulders to maintain healthy alignment. You must make it a priority to keep the corners of your shoulders pointing forward at all times (see fig. 4.5). The alignment is set up in the Sun Salutations and carried through the entire practice. Similarly, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog Pose) is the foundation of all backbends. You should work not just on maintaining the arch of the spine, but actually deepening the spinal extension that is possible in this pose (see fig. 4.7). Maintaining strong back muscles and good alignment in Urdhva Mukha Svanasana throughout your entire practice helps protect your spine during the deep flexion postures that place your legs behind your head.

Utkatasana (see fig. 4.8) is directly related to the first posture on the Intermediate Series, Pasasana (see figs. 4.9a and 4.9b). Bending your knees deeply enough to access your hip joints and stretch your ankles will give you a firm foundation for this posture. Virabhadrasana A (see figs. 4.10 and 4.11) opens the hip flexors, externally rotates the extended leg, and deepens the hip flexion of the bent leg. Aiming your bent knee forward toward the middle of your foot will help strengthen your legs for postures like Tittibhasana (Firefly Pose) and give you deeper access to your pelvis in backbends.



Figure 4.10



Figure 4.11

These small alignment pointers of what to focus on are meant to build a bridge between the introductory movements of the previous book and the more challenging asanas presented in this one. These simple tools are also meant to help your practice turn from the physical to the subtle, which is a crucial lesson in the journey of every yoga practitioner.

SURYA NAMASKARA A



Samsthiti (no breath, start and end each movement here)



Ekam —Inhale (one breath)



Dve—Exhale (one breath)



Trīṇi—Inhale (one breath)



Catvāri—Exhale (one breath)



Pañca—Inhale (one breath)



Ṣaṭ—Exhale (five breaths)



Sapta—Inhale (one breath)



Astau—Exhale (one breath)



Nava—Inhale (one breath)



Samsthiti—Exhale (start and end each movment here)

SURYA NAMASKARA B


Samsthiti (no breath, start and end each movement here)



Ekam—Inhale (one breath)



Dve—Exhale (one breath)



Trīņi—Inhale (one breath)



Catvāri—Exhale (one breath)



Pañca—Inhale (one breath)



Ṣaț—Exhale (one breath)



Sapta—Inhale (one breath)



Astau—Exhale (one breath)



Nava—Inhale (one breath)



Daśa—Exhale (one breath)



Ekādaśa—Inhale (one breath)



Duādaśa—Exhale (one breath)



Trayodaśa—Inhale (one breath)



Caturdaśa—Exhale (five breaths)



Pañcadaśa—Inhale (one breath)



Ṣoḍaśa—Exhale (one breath)



Saptadaśa— Inhale (one breath)



Samsthiti—Exhale (start and end each movement here)

Standing Postures

THE STANDING POSES ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE daily Ashtanga Yoga method. As a student of the Intermediate Series, you should be well-versed in these poses from your prior experience of the Primary Series. The biggest temptation will be to speed through these fundamental postures in an effort to conserve energy for the challenging asanas that follow. But it is better to cherish these postures and practice them with even more mindfulness. All the yoga poses are connected, and focusing on their interrelationship will deepen your understanding of the Ashtanga Yoga method. Any difficulty you have with one posture can usually be mirrored in a more basic posture where it is easier to work on.

Whenever I got the opportunity to join a guided Intermediate Series practice with my teachers, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and R. Sharath Jois, I always noticed that they had students spend a long time in the standing poses. It was almost expected that Intermediate students would be able to hold these postures for longer periods of time and with greater ease than students in the Primary Series classes. Holding the poses for a longer time did not necessarily mean taking additional breaths. Elongating inhalation and exhalation in each posture as you begin to feel more comfortable in it is a natural step deeper into the practice. While it is tempting to breeze through these easier poses, you should take your time, breathing fully and slowly to turn the practice more toward the subtle body and less toward the purely physical practice.

On a practical note, if you are practicing the Intermediate Series by adding to the postures of the Primary Series before your backbends, then continue through the Primary Series until you reach the end before starting your Intermediate Series asanas. If you are practicing only the Intermediate Series, whether completely or not, proceed directly to Pasasana after the last standing pose in the method indicated in this chapter.

Whereas a detailed breakdown of the alignment of each of the standing poses was given in The Power of Ashtanga Yoga, the analysis that follows is meant to direct you in your daily practice. In addition to the directions outlined here, I challenge you to do the inner work and search out the relationships between not only the standing poses and the Intermediate Series, but between all the postures of the entire Ashtanga Yoga method. Remember that the main lesson of this series is to master the different states of the nervous system, both the pranic and apanic patterns. Look at your performance of the standing poses and see how your natural patterns are accentuated by your habitual tendencies. For example, you might notice that you have a tendency in certain postures to overextend the back and recruit the muscles of spinal extension in an effort to go deeper. This tendency toward spinal extension may be a postural pattern that favors engaging the back muscles over the core muscles, or the pranic state over the apanic or neutral state. Using the mirror of the asana it is possible to understand your basic postural, emotional, and neurological tendencies. Use these postures to create balance between these two states and bring equanimity to your mind.

When starting off with Padangusthasana (Big Toe Pose; see fig. 5.1) and Padahastasana (Hands-to-Feet Pose; see fig. 5.2), tip your hips forward, control your body from your pelvic floor, and learn to move from the back of your body. This builds crucial strength awareness that moves your hips and sacrum forward through the power of your pelvic floor.



Figure 5.1



Figure 5.2

I like to think of the hips as the steering wheel of the body because the center of gravity sits in the hips. But unlike a car, you cannot grab hold of the wheel with your hands. You have to catch your center of gravity with the muscles of your pelvic floor and learn to steer your body based on sensory awareness. If you start in simple forward bends like this, then it builds your

relationship with your pelvic floor for more challenging inversions such as Pinchamayurasana, Karandavasana, and the variations of Sirsasana (Headstand). The flexibility you gain from the additional stretch through your hamstrings as you lean forward will also help increase your flexibility for legbehind-the-head poses such as Eka Pada Sirsasana (Foot-behind-the-Head Pose) and Tittibhasana. Both Trikonasana A and B (Extended Triangle Pose) deepen your hip crease and facilitate movement in the ball and socket of your hip joint. Trikonasana A (see figs. 5.3 and 5.4) sets up the external rotation of your hip joint that is related to all lotus and half-lotus postures, Parighasana (Gate Pose), and leg-behind-the-head poses. Trikonasana B (see figs. 5.5 and 5.6) provides a gentle inward rotation of your hip joint that gives access to the interior space of your pelvis, facilitating deeper backbends and twists.



Figure 5.3



Figure 5.4



Figure 5.5



Figure 5.6

Parsvakonasana A (Extended Side Angle Pose; see figs. 5.7 and 5.8) sets up the external rotation of your hip joint and brings your torso around your thigh, which is crucial for deep leg-behind-the-head poses. Parsvakonasana B (Revolved Side Angle Pose; see figs. 5.9 and 5.10) is one of the most important postures for setting up Pasasana and all other twists in the Intermediate Series. The inward rotation of the thigh you twist around creates the foundation for twisting. There is a semi-bind established between your shoulder and your knee that establishes the same body mechanics you need to enter Pasasana and other twists safely. Twisting your body over your thigh demands that you hollow out your lower belly, draw the bandhas in deep, and enter the interior space of your pelvis. The movement initiation pattern established here for twists will follow you forward through the whole Intermediate Series, so take the time to set it up properly. Build your foundation, then laterally stretch to fold your torso around your thigh. Draw your lower belly deep inside, hollow out your pelvis, and fold into the spaciousness. Reach your arm forward through the inward rotation of your forward hip to fold around your thigh and knee. Finally, flexion of the forward ankle is a must in this posture to open the ankles for a deep squatting position in Pasasana.



Figure 5.7



Figure 5.8



Figure 5.9



Figure 5.10

Prasarita Padottanasana A (Wide-Legged Forward Bend; see fig. 5.11), B (see fig. 5.12), and D (see fig. 5.15) are the perfect places to work on deep flexion of the hips. Do not just stop where you are comfortable. Work on sliding your torso between your thighs as a preparation for Tittibhasana. This movement also reinforces your ability to move from the back of your body

while maintaining balance in your pelvic floor, which helps with all inverted poses.



Figure 5.11



Figure 5.12



Figure 5.13



Figure 5.14

You should focus on both positions of your shoulders in Prasarita Padottanasana C (see figs. 5.13 and 5.14). Turning your hands outward to facilitate an internal rotation of your shoulders helps create space in the shoulder joints. This spacious inward rotation is the healthy movement initiation pattern that will be repeated in Pasasana, Danurasana (Bow Pose),

Ustrasana (Camel Pose), Ardha Matsyendrasana (Lord of the Half Fishes Pose), Tittibhasana, and numerous other poses. Do not push to reach the floor; instead, be more subtle in your point of focus and feel the movement toward internal rotation in your shoulder joint. Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch Pose; see fig. 5.16) isolates the inward rotation of your forward thigh and deepens the activation of your pelvic floor to prepare for Pasasana, Krounchasana (Heron Pose), Bhekasana (Frog Pose), Tittibhasana, and Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose).



Figure 5.15

Whenever you have difficulty in the Intermediate Series, search for answers and remedies in the standing poses, and you will be on your way to an integrated practice. Keep your mind open to discovering new connections between the postures, and your practice will remain fresh every day. The following outline of the standing poses includes photos from both the right and the left sides when beneficial to the demonstration of the asana.



Figure 5.16



Padangusthasana (five breaths)



Padahastasana (five breaths)



Trikonasana A (five breaths each side)



Trikonasana B (Revolved Triangle Pose; five breaths each side)



Parsvakonasana A (five breaths each side)



Parsvakonasana B (five breaths each side)



Prasarita Padottanasana A (five breaths)



Prasarita Padottanasana B (five breaths)



Prasarita Padottanasana C (five breaths)



Prasarita Padottanasana D (five breaths)



Parsvottanasana (five breaths each side)

Courageous Backbends

FOR MANY YOGA STUDENTS, THE BEGINNING OF THE Intermediate Series seems like an insurmountable hurdle that they may strive a whole lifetime to master. It is in the backbends of this series that many practitioners meet their greatest test. Ashtanga Yoga uses these challenging postures to trigger deep-seated negative patterns in an effort to retrain the nervous system's response to stress. In other words, the poses themselves are actually meant to bring up heightened feelings of distress so you can learn how to balance your mind and meet pleasure and pain with equanimity. The physical yoga practice is designed to create scenarios in which you experience panic, stress, and other strong emotions so you can build the brave heart of a yogi, to go directly into those scary places and remain calm and steady.

Shortness of breath and heightened emotions are not always associated with physical pain. Some students who are naturally able to perform many of these asanas will still experience the emotional intensity of the inner work of backbends. Sometimes a person is naturally gifted with the ability to move easily into an asana. The challenge then more often comes when he or she is asked to repeat that posture regularly as part of daily practice.

The inner energetics of backbends seek to lift energy along the *sushumna nadi* so the spiritual body can be fully awakened. Some students feel this as a tremor or shaking along the spinal column, intense emotions, or hot sensations throughout the body. Some students new to deep backbends experience intensive dreams and are not able to sleep at night while they are adjusting to this heightened state of awareness. Almost all students experience muscular soreness as the back muscles strengthen. By actively engaging your pelvic floor, you create a firm root that stimulates your subtle energy while grounding your mind in the present moment. Then, with the powerful spinal extensions, you grab this energy from the root of your spine and lift up along

the entire spinal column through the physical activity of extension until the energy rises out through the top of your head.

Going into the first portion of the Intermediate Series as part of a daily practice feels at first like Hell Week in the rigorous training to become a Navy SEAL. This is the most brutal period of Navy SEAL training that breaks most potential candidates and includes a practiced assault on their air supply in a diving pool. This moment is critical because it trains potential SEALs in the skill of combat diving. When people are faced with a lack of oxygen and the inability to breathe, most of the training they've received falls away, sheer panic takes over, and they fail to follow directions. When the breath is compromised, the panic response is triggered in the brain, fear sets in, and a whole host of other biochemical reactions are put into play that undermine the mind's ability to stay focused on the task at hand. While yoga is not part of Navy SEAL training and the people who give their lives to the armed forces deserve respect beyond what these words can convey, their training can teach us yoga practitioners how to work with our mind when faced with difficult postures that restrict the breath.

The deep backbends of the Intermediate Series are designed to challenge your nervous system, to simulate the feeling of drowning, and to trigger the fight-or-flight response so you can retrain your reaction to difficult life situations that bring up the same neurological response. The most important gateway posture, Kapotasana, has broken the ego of many Ashtanga Yoga students while opening a humble door to the inner body. The emotional lesson contained in almost all backbends is about relaxing into what you feel like you have to fight against. The U.S. government studied the effects of Hell Week, and scientists found four tools to help prospective candidates pass this grueling test. These tools can help you as well during your journey into the Second Series backbends.

Four Tools from the Navy SEALs to Help You Be Brave in Backbends

- 1. Positive self-talk
- 2. Mental rehearsing/visualization
- 3. Goal setting

4. Breath control

The first tool suggested to Navy SEAL trainees is self-talk. This means maintaining precise directions throughout the exercise and tilting your inner dialogue slightly toward the positive while remaining rooted in reality. Calm inner dialogue that is rooted in logic stimulates the prefrontal cortex, which helps assuage the fight-or-flight response. In other words, you need to be your own coach and gently talk yourself through the task at hand while keeping your dialogue focused on the stated set of directions and refraining from negative inner dialogue. The second tool, mental rehearsing or visualizing the activity while maintaining a positive emotional outlook, prepares your nervous system to be calm when you actually experience the activity in question. The third tool is setting small, attainable goals, allowing you to measure your success and pace yourself throughout the movement. Finally, the fourth tool is gaining control over your emotional state through breath control, giving you power over your mind. Ashtanga Yoga students who face their Hell Week during the backbends portion of the Intermediate Series should think of themselves as Navy SEAL trainees and diligently apply these four tools.

This guide to training the mind can help you stay focused when you are faced with difficulty in your practice. Whenever you feel lost within your own body or on the verge of panic, simply go through these four points. Talk to yourself in a calm, clear manner that is focused on the technical and anatomical directions of the asana. If you are unclear as to how to approach the posture, then consult your teacher or a reference manual like this book. Find an effective anatomical, technical pointer on which to set your focus, and repeat it mentally while going into the movement you find most challenging. This will steady your mind and increase your body's ability to move through the posture.

Visualize the pose that is your greatest obstacle either directly before you practice it or outside of practice like a meditation. Play it like a movie in your mind's eye, analyze each step, and feel your way through it. Wherever you get lost in your visualization will be your point of difficulty in the posture. Include the positive emotions you associate with finally executing the movement as well. To set your goal for an asana, all you have to do is look to

the Ashtanga Yoga method, which asks you to stay in each posture for five breaths and then move on. If five breaths seems like too long, set the goal of taking one breath and slowly build up from there.

Finally, breath control is a fundamental component of the Ashtanga Yoga method. Equalize the length of your inhalations and exhalations by applying Ashtanga Yoga breathing, based in the Ujjayi Pranayama, and your mind will remain calm. Remain consciously aware of your breathing to stay rooted in the present moment.

PASASANA

Noose Pose

Drishti: Parsva (Side)

If you are progressing directly into the Intermediate Series after the standing poses, start in Samsthiti, inhale, raise your hands over your head, and press your palms together as in Surya Namaskara A. Exhale and fold forward, placing your hands next to your feet. Inhale, look up, and lengthen your spine while drawing in your lower belly. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and lift your spine into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back over your toes to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

If you are adding on the poses of the Intermediate Series after completing the Primary Series, start from the last Adho Mukha Svanasana of the Primary Series, after Setu Bandhasana, rather than from Samsthiti. From Adho Mukha Svanasana, immediately inhale again as you jump forward to a squatting position to prepare for the posture.



Figure 6.1

Maintaining your squatting position, align your feet so the balls of the big toes and the anklebones touch lightly. Place your heels firmly on the ground while engaging your pelvic floor to lift your pelvis slightly, and press firmly into the balls of your feet. A strong supported squatting position is the basis of Pasasana. If you find it challenging to hold the squat without lifting your heels, you may benefit from pausing to work on your squat before you enter the pose. To do this, lift your hips only as much as needed to get your heels to the floor while bringing your arms forward, parallel to the floor; hold this position for five breaths. Try to keep your heels on the floor as you lower your pelvis again. If your heels come off the ground, continue in this position to enter the pose, but note that your balance will be compromised since you lack the complete foundation you need (see fig. 6.1). If your heels are slightly raised in the squat, it is important to keep as much connection between your heels and the ground and bend your ankles as much as possible. Your weight should be evenly distributed between the front and back of your feet, while your ankles and shins work diligently to support your body. Try not to prop yourself up on your toes, the balls of your feet, or a prop. Instead, keep pressing your weight downward into your heels, even if they are off the ground, bending your ankles and engaging your shins as much as possible so that one day your Achilles tendons will release and your heels will touch the floor. Use a towel or block under your heels only if you have an ankle injury or very bad balance.



Figure 6.2



Figure 6.3

Proceeding either with your heels slightly raised or pressed firmly into the ground, exhale as you enter the posture, twisting to the left, and binding your hands around your squatting position (see fig. 6.2). All twists involve both a lateral stretch and a spinal twist. Pasasana relies on a deep lateral stretch as the basis of entering the posture, and if you elongate your spine too much, you will lose the connection between your arms and legs that holds your body in the full expression of the pose. To feel the lateral stretch, suck the right side of your lower belly in deeply, employ the bandhas to hollow out your pelvis and create space, and move your torso to the left side. Then suck your lower ribs in toward the center of your body and move your whole torso to the left. Finally, lean your whole body to the left from your pelvic floor all the way to your shoulders. Once this lateral stretch is established, exhale deeply as you twist your torso toward your left hip joint. Allow the hip joint to rotate inward to create space for your torso to move around it. Do not lift upward. Instead, lean to the side, allowing your torso and waist to squeeze into the central axis of your body, creating space around your pelvis, then use this space to enter the pose. Once you have established a deep lateral stretch, exhale as you reach your right shoulder forward and down, rotating the shoulder joint inward as your right elbow bends around both shins. Your right hand is now in position to receive the left. Keeping all the previous points of alignment in place, lift your left hand around your back in the direction of your right thigh, transferring your weight into your pelvic floor and strengthening your shins and ankles. Exhale as you rotate your left shoulder outward; open the left side of your chest and rib cage; and bring your hands together, binding your fingers or wrist on the outer rim of your right thigh (see fig. 6.3). Look over your left shoulder. Hold this posture for five breaths.



Figure 6.4

Exhale and release, then inhale and twist to the right, repeating the same progression of lateral stretching culminating in a spinal twist to switch the sides. Look over your right shoulder. Hold this posture for five breaths. Exhale and release. Place your hands on either side of your feet, inhaling as you lift your hips slightly by leaning forward; keep your arms straight, engage your core strongly, and lift your feet off the ground (see fig. 6.4). If you cannot lift both feet, you can either lift your knees into your chest while keeping both feet on the ground or lift one foot toward your pelvis (see figs. 6.5 and 6.6). Exhale as you bend your elbows and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, and exhale as you enter Adho Mukha Svanasana.


Figure 6.5

If you cannot bind your hands together, you can hold a towel to create the sensation of a bind or try binding around one knee rather than both knees to get the feeling of the posture. Pregnant women should avoid deep twisting, which compresses the lower belly, and they should open the legs and bind around only one leg, giving space to their belly. For example, when twisting toward the left, the left leg is open and the bind is only around the right leg, giving space to the belly and making the twist easier and less constrictive around the torso.



Figure 6.6

Pasasana deeply cleanses your digestive system, opens your shoulders to prepare for the deep backbends ahead, and awakens your nervous system for the cleansing work of the Intermediate Series. While most twists start on the right side, you enter this one on the left first. Pasasana is meant to help your hips rotate inward, your shoulders open, your feet build a solid foundation, and your pelvic floor become spacious and hollow. This first pose of the Intermediate Series is a challenging one, so if you find it difficult, take extra time to work on it until it is fully integrated into your practice before proceeding. Do not rush past the sticking points. Consider repeating this posture two or three times each day until you are able to bind your hands more easily. Only proceed when you feel stable in the asana.

BENEFITS

Stretches and strengthens the ankles

Improves digestion and elimination Opens the chest, shoulders, and lower back Engages the pelvic floor

Encourages grounding through the legs and internal rotation of the hips

KROUNCHASANA

Heron Pose

Drishti: Padayoragra (Toes)

Enter this pose directly from the previous one, coming from Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale as you jump forward and through your arms to a seated position with your legs straight. Bend your right knee back while rotating your right thigh inward. Move the flesh of your right calf muscle out of the way. Align your heel with the outer edge of your hip joint, and place both sit bones fully on the ground. Lift your left leg off the ground and point your toes toward the ceiling (you can bend your knee first, if necessary, or keep it straight all the way up); if possible, clasp your wrist around the sole of your left foot. Straighten your arms while keeping your shoulder blades drawn down your back. Draw your thighs toward each other to create internal rotation and look up (see fig. 6.7). If you are proficient in both jumping through and internal rotation, you can jump directly into this preparatory posture.



Figure 6.7

Exhale as you bend your elbows, and draw your left leg toward your chin by gently pulling down into your hip joint (see figs. 6.8 and 6.9). Align the

center of your sternum and your pubic bone forward to your left knee. Keep both thighs rolling inward and your hips squared forward. There is a tendency to round the lower back and jut the head forward while attempting to bring the chin close to the shin. Instead of pulling your spine downward, elongate it upward using the core of your body to reach forward and up along the central axis. Do not use your hands to force your hamstrings and calves open. Instead, use your arms to pull the head of your left femur down into its socket to deepen the flexion of your left hip, activate your pelvic floor even more, and help both thighs rotate inward. The work of this posture should be concentrated in your pelvis, so if you feel your arms pulling too hard, relax the effort and reconnect with the power center in your pelvis. Your left leg should ideally have the strength and flexibility to remain lifted on its own rather than relying on the support of your hands. You can find this strength by tuning in to the hollowness in your pelvic bowl around the left hip joint. Roll your thighs toward each other while engaging your pelvic floor for stability. Stay in the pose for five breaths, then inhale as you straighten your arms and look up, pausing in the preparatory pose (see fig. 6.7). Exhale to settle into your bandhas.



Figure 6.8



Figure 6.9

Take your hands to the floor on either side of your hips and inhale to lift off the ground. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and move to Urdha Mukha Svanasana; exhale and move to Adho Mukha Svanasana. As you inhale, jump through and repeat the pose on the right side using the same coordination of breath to movement.

Back off if you feel any pinching around the bent knee, as this may signal a potential injury. You may find relief by sitting on a towel or block to elevate your pelvis. However, the best solution is to elongate your quadriceps to facilitate the internal rotation needed to bend your knee back safely. The lengthening of your quadriceps to facilitate the internal rotation cultivated in this pose is a vital component of the deep backbends that follow. If you find this posture challenging, it might be useful to spend some extra time studying the internal hip rotation presented in Tiryang Mukha Ekapada Paschimattanasana (Three-Limbed Forward Fold Pose) from the Primary Series. If you are not able to perform Krounchasana easily, stop and work on the elements of this posture before proceeding.

BENEFITS

Internally rotates the thighs

Engages the pelvic floor

Opens the sacrum

Stretches the hamstrings and calves Helps relieve the symptoms of sciatica

SHALABHASANA A AND B

Locust Pose A and B

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Starting off in Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower into Chaturanga Dandasana. Hold yourself here for a moment, engaging your core strength and firming your shoulders and chest. Shalabhasana, along with the next three poses, starts off with a momentary hold in Chaturanga Dandasana. Whenever I would attend Guruji's Intermediate Series group classes, he would place special emphasis on this momentary hold. If even one person failed to maintain the posture, he would hold the entire group together until that person returned to Chaturanga Dandasana. The lesson I learned was not to rush through the vinyasa and hurry toward the asanas. Make each breath count. Focusing on the strength in Chaturanga Dandasana also activates the core, creating a balance to intensive backbends that begins now.

After you stabilize for a moment, exhale completely and lower all the way to the floor in a prone position. Roll your shoulders forward, straighten your arms along the sides of your body, and align your hands with your hips. Turn the palms upward, press the top of each hand into the ground, and spread your fingers slightly apart while pressing the tops of the fingers near the nails into the ground. Engage your pelvic floor to support your spine, and suck your lower belly deep inside. Inhale as you press the front bones of your pelvis into the ground to open your hip joints and nutate the sacrum. Sacral nutation is a subtle movement where the front ridge of the sacrum near the sacroiliac joint tips forward and up into the inner space of the pelvis, allowing the sacroiliac joint to function more like a spinal process. Without this small movement the sacrum gets locked in place and the lower back may compress when entering deep backbends. Lift your chest off the ground and send your sternum up and forward to create length and fully enter Shalabhasana A.

Keep your legs totally straight and feel your thighs engaging while you raise them off the ground (see fig. 6.10). Fully engage your quadriceps, placing extra emphasis on the activation of the vastus medialis, the innermost head of the quadriceps muscle. Do not try to lift your feet higher by bending your knees; simply feel the iliac crests pressing into the ground while lifting your thighs as high as possible. Extend energy out through your big toes, and

press the bases of your big toes and heels toward each other. Avoid pressing the soles of your feet together. Rotate your thighs inward to help give your sacrum space. Maintain a lengthening sensation through your whole body while engaging your back muscles.



Figure 6.10

After five breaths, keep your legs in the same position and switch your hands to Chaturanga Dandasana position, aligning the heel of each hand with your natural waist and the fingers with your ribs to enter Shalabhasana B (see fig. 6.11). Stay in this posture for another five breaths. Be careful not to press too strongly with your arms or you will overactivate your chest and potentially strain your back muscles. Simply use the alternative hand position to test the endurance of your back and core.

As you maintain the two versions of this pose for a total of ten breaths, your back muscles will be working intensely. There is no risk of injuring your back as long as your pelvic floor is engaged, your lower belly is drawn deep inside to support your spine, and you avoid lifting your chest too high. Your thighs should be firm throughout the whole movement, and your breath should be steady and deep. Do not press your pubic bone into the ground; press the iliac crests down, but keep your tailbone heavy and your pubic bone elongating backward. Feel how this pelvic movement encourages deeper backbends by tipping the front ridge of your sacrum forward into your pelvis to help nutate the sacrum. Being conscious of the principles of backbends while working in Shalabhasana sets up your whole technical foundation for deeper backbends. All backbends seek to elongate the spine, create space between the vertebrae, and then bend into the space that is created. Think of reaching out and slightly forward through the top of your head while reaching back and slightly out through your toes to create a long clean line of energy through your whole body. Do not compress your spine. If you feel a crunching sensation in your lower back, bring your legs closer to the floor and engage your pelvic floor more strongly. If you notice that your torso rises and falls with each breath, your lower belly is not drawn in far enough to support your lumbar spine.



Figure 6.11

After a total of ten deep breaths, inhale and lift your body directly into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana. Exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana to prepare for the next pose.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the back, thighs, and pelvic floor

Treats chronic back pain Helps relieve the symptoms of herniated disks (if done gently)

BHEKASANA

Frog Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Start off in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Exhale as you lower into Chaturanga Dandasana and hold yourself here, engaging your core muscles while firming your shoulders and chest. Exhale again and lower all the way to the floor in a prone position. Press your iliac crests into the ground and engage your pelvic floor, while allowing your thighs to roll inward and your knees to bend. Move your feet slightly wider than hip-width apart and bend your knees. If you try to force your knees to bend, you run the risk of injuring them and restricting your range of motion. Simply allow your knees to bend while aligning your heels with the outside edges of your hip joints. Lift your upper back off the ground as though you are entering Shalabhasana A, and reach back and hold on to the inside edges of your feet. Wrap the valleys of your thumbs and index fingers around the mounds of your big toes while pointing your toes up to the ceiling to prepare for the main pose (see fig. 6.12).



Figure 6.12

Be sure that your feet and knees are slightly wider apart than your hips to ensure that your feet will be in the proper position for full Bhekasana. To enter the pose, lift your elbows and flip your fingers over the tops of your feet; simultaneously press into your iliac crests to lift your thighs off the ground and bend your knees to allow your feet to reach toward the ground alongside your hip joints (see fig. 6.13). Gaze toward your nose to turn your mind inward. Change the direction of your hands and fingers to point forward as you roll through this movement and lift your chest off the ground. Gently push on the tops of your feet to bring your toes closer to the ground while elongating your quadriceps and lengthening your legs back and away from your pelvis.



Figure 6.13

Strongly point your toes forward and toward the floor just outside your hips. If your toes point toward your buttocks, you are not aligned properly because your feet need space so they can safely move toward the floor. Draw your shoulder blades toward your spine, bring your elbows slightly toward each other, and press down onto your feet to move deeper. Keep pressing your iliac crests into the ground to lift your thighs higher and give your knees more space. Reach your knees backward, away from your torso, while allowing your sacrum to nutate and your lower back to remain spacious. Keep your thighs rotated inward to safely facilitate the required bend in your knees.

If you feel a pinching inside your knee, back off immediately and instead try to feel an elongation through your thighs and quadriceps. Stay in this posture for five deep breaths, then inhale and lift your body directly into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana. Exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana to prepare for the next pose.

I had a hard time entering this posture when I first started integrating it into my practice. I could not accept that it was safe to bend my knees in this way, and it created a big mental obstacle to my practice of Bhekasana. I did not have any pain other than my mental reservations, but it is not uncommon for students to have both physical discomfort as well as logical objections to this asana. The entry into Bhekasana is often the most challenging, because many students fail to understand or execute the turning of the hands to guide their feet into position.

One technique that helps overcome mental and physical obstacles in this posture is to practice entering a modified version of Bhekasana that bends only one knee at a time (see fig. 6.14). Follow the same technical and anatomical directions as for the full pose, adjusted to account for the movement's localization on one side of the body. The leg that remains straight will be a stabilizer, so press the toes of that leg firmly into the ground to equalize your pelvis. Hold on both the right side and the left side for five breaths before attempting the full posture. Working on each side of the movement individually helps you isolate the particular movement pattern that is most efficient to take you into the complete version of Bhekasana. Eventually, when you are more comfortable in Bhekasana, you can move directly into the pose without any preparatory steps.



Figure 6.14

DANURASANA

Bow Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Start off in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Exhale as you lower into Chaturanga Dandasana and hold here, engaging your core strength while firming your shoulders and chest. Then exhale again and lower all the way to the floor in a prone position. Inhale as you press your iliac crests into the ground and nutate your sacrum, lift your thighs and bend your knees, extend your upper back, roll your shoulders forward, and reach your hands back toward your ankles to clasp them firmly.

After your fingers are wrapped around your ankles, press your iliac crests more firmly into the ground to increase the sacral nutation. Allow your back muscles to engage to support your spine while drawing in your lower belly and firming your pelvic floor. Press the sides of your big toes into each other and roll your thighs inward to release your sacrum. Avoid squeezing your buttocks to start, if possible. Kick your legs back and pull forward with equal force through your arms and chest to enter Danurasana (see fig. 6.15). Gaze toward your nose and stay in the pose for five breaths. While the technique of this entry into Danurasana requires a high level of neuromuscular control, it prepares you for the most healthy alignment in the pose.

If you have a hard time with this pose, bend your knees a little to bring your ankles closer to your hands, but try to keep your thighs off the ground. Keep your knees no wider than hip-width apart. Ideally, keep your knees close together throughout the whole posture. This is a complex movement that is best initiated in one cohesive movement pattern. Break up the movement only if absolutely necessary.



Figure 6.15

Students who are less flexible may find it necessary to start by lifting their thighs off the ground through a conscious activation of sacral nutation. Once that is established, it may be possible to reach back with the right hand and clasp the right ankle, then reach back with the left hand and clasp the left ankle. While this may seem easier, it is not recommended unless absolutely necessary because the asymmetrical movement to catch one ankle before the other has the potential to destabilize the spine by accentuating a pull to one side more than the other. If possible, go into the movement symmetrically to create equal strength and flexibility in both sides of your body.

The "bow" of this posture is created by an equal activation of the arms and legs. It is useful to think of this pose both as the archer's bow and as the beautiful arch of a rainbow.

Firm your thighs while reaching your legs fully off the ground and diagonally back, kicking them away from your head. Pull forward and down with your arms while rotating your shoulders inward to balance the activation. Do not rock back and forth. The equal force between the strength of your legs and arms creates an arch that is distributed through each of your vertebrae. Think about extending your spine, creating space between its joints on each inhalation and then using that space to bend deeper on every exhalation. Gently continue the extension through your cervical spine while

allowing energy to rise up toward the top of your head to continue the arch of your spine. It may help to look up while you get your head and neck into position and then switch your gaze to your nose after you feel fully stable in the pose.

This posture is a crucial preparation for deep backbends because it teaches you how to use your legs and distribute the work of the backbend throughout your entire body. If you favor one place along your spine—or your legs or arms—you will generally overuse that area. Long-term backbends are safe and healing when the work of the posture happens throughout the entire body. It is an indication of a good posture if you feel that your whole body, including your thighs, arms, back, and pelvic floor, is working while your mind and breathing are steady and calm. That being said, it is common for students to feel their thigh muscles burning in Danurasana, which is a good sign of strong leg activation and should not be avoided or taken as a counterindication.

After five breaths, move immediately into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana on an inhalation. Exhale and roll back into Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BENEFITS

Improves digestion

Treats constipation

Strengthens the spine and back

Builds mental endurance

Relieves anxiety Helps relieve the symptoms of mild back pain Stretches and opens the front of the body, including the heart Improves cardiovascular function

PARSVA DANURASANA

Side Bow Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Start off in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Exhale as you lower into Chaturanga Dandasana and hold here, engaging your core strength while firming your shoulders and chest. Exhale again and lower all the way to the floor in a prone position. Inhale as you lift up into Danurasana (see fig. 6.15) following the same movement pattern as described for the previous pose. On the next exhalation, still holding Danurasana, roll your whole body to the right so your right side is on the floor, literally turning the bow on its side (see fig. 6.16). Stay here for five breaths, then inhale and return to Danurasana. Exhale and roll to the left, turning Danurasana to the left side, and stay here for five breaths (see fig. 6.17). Inhale, return to Danurasana, and hold for five more breaths (see fig. 6.15).



Figure 6.16



Figure 6.17

Expect to be exhausted by the end of these fifteen breaths. The two struggles of Parsva Danurasana are endurance and alignment. It is hard to keep the same alignment and integrity when lying on your side. Yet it is imperative that you give the same attention to detail in this posture as in the original so you protect your spine and maximize the healing potential of the pose. Whenever I am a bit out of practice, holding Parsva Danurasana for the full fifteen breaths is a challenge. Allow any shaking or burning sensations in your muscles to strengthen your determination to stay the course of the posture.

When rolling to the right and left, initiate the movement from deep within your pelvic floor, suck in your lower belly, and drive the center of your body to the side while allowing your shoulders, chest, and legs to follow. Let your head arch back to continue the natural extension of your spine. Do not rest your head on the floor or turn it to the right or the left.

Once the side of your body touches the ground, the real work of the posture begins. Reach forward with the side of the rib cage and shoulder that is pressing into the floor. Tilt your head back so that the top of your head reaches back toward your feet, but continue to gaze at your nose. Plant the side of your pelvis firmly on the floor as your foundation through the side of your body. Nutate your sacrum while extending your spine. Actively reach

your feet and thighs away from your hips to create length in your lower back and open your hip joints. Keep your knees and feet close together. Avoid lifting your elevated knee too high, or you may put unnecessary stress on the knee joint. Ideally, you will feel a slightly increased stretch along the elevated side of your pelvis, back, shoulders, and chest.

After five deep breaths, initiate the movement to return to Danurasana from the elevated side of your pelvis, aiming the floating iliac crest toward the ground. Drive the center of your body back to its upright position from the bowl of your pelvis, and allow the rest of your body to follow. Be conscious about keeping your feet and knees relatively close together throughout this transition, or you risk injuring your knees. When you return to the final Danurasana for five breaths, you will be tested mentally and physically. Stay true to the alignment previously described and maintain a consciously positive inner dialogue. You should find your thighs and back engaging firmly and perhaps even burning. If you feel the muscles working steadily and your joints remain pain-free, it is safe to proceed. If you feel any sharp or pinching sensations in your spine, you should immediately come out of the pose.

After five breaths in Danurasana, move immediately into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana on an inhalation. Exhale and roll back into Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BENEFITS

Improves digestion

Treats constipation Strengthens and balances the back and spine Builds mental endurance

Treats anxiety Relieves the symptoms of mild back pain Stretches and opens the front of the body, including the heart
Improves cardiovascular function

USTRASANA

Camel Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Ustrasana is one of the most healing and therapeutic backbends in the entire Ashtanga Yoga method. This posture is found in almost every style of yoga, and its practice has the potential to bring health to the whole body while preparing you for much deeper backbends. My teacher, R. Sharath Jois, is keen on calling Ustrasana an easy pose, and if so, it may be the only one in the Intermediate Series. Since Ustrasana is slightly less complex than some of the other asanas in this series, it might be tempting to gloss over it and rush; however, careful practice will increase your understanding of the inner work of yoga.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale and jump forward directly into a kneeling position. Land as softly as possible by pulling your knees in as close to your torso as possible and activating your core. Stack your hips, torso, shoulders, and head directly over your knees so that you are "standing" on your knees while keeping your chin tucked into your chest. Exhale and place your hands on your waist in preparation, but do not start bending backward yet (see fig. 6.18). Inhale again to create space between your vertebrae, suck your stomach in, thrust your pelvis forward, and ground your legs.

Do not rush this crucial preparation for entering the posture. If you merely throw your body backward without creating space and support for the movement, you risk compressing the joints in your spine. All backbends seek to create space on an inhalation and then facilitate movement into that space on an exhalation. With your hands on your waist, feel the inhalation lift energy upward along the central axis of your body toward the top of your head. Let this energetic lift naturally pull your lower belly toward your spine, lift your rib cage, and raise your sternum. Only after you feel that sufficient space has been created should you progress to the complete pose.

If you feel challenged in the preparation, you should not attempt to push deeper. Instead, stay with your hands on your waist, building strength and flexibility in your spine until you are strong enough to move into Ustrasana.

Exhale as you use the space that you have created to bend backward. Thrust your hips forward; drop your head back; extend your spine; and bring the heels of your hands to the heels of your feet, pointing your fingers toward your toes to enter the pose (see fig. 6.19). Try to move both hands in unison, and avoid twisting your spine or shoulders in an attempt to reach one foot before the other.



Figure 6.18

If you start to feel compression in your lower back or neck, you may find it useful to enter the posture even more slowly. Instead of reaching directly back into Ustrasana, bring your thumbs to your sacrum in the initial kneeling position. Then send your hips forward, your head back, and your elbows toward each other (see fig. 6.20). Use your hands to support your lower back. If you are uncomfortable here, you may decide to hold this posture and wait until you are strong enough for the full movement.

Continuing Ustrasana, bend at the hips by opening the front of your hip joints while keeping your waist small and drawn in. Arch your whole spine backward to enter the pose, and avoid bending your knees to reach back for your feet. Keep your thighs perpendicular to the ground and your knees hipwidth apart.



Figure 6.19

Once your hands make contact with the soles of your feet, roll your shoulders forward to internal rotation and actively press your hands into your feet. Keep your fingers close together, and gently release your neck back. Push your pelvis forward while nutating your sacrum to open the front of your pelvis. Send your tailbone forward, but do *not* tuck it under. If you tuck your tailbone too strongly, you will flatten your lumbar spine and encourage spinal flexion, whereas Ustrasana is a spinal extension. Only if you have a lumbar back injury or if your sacroiliac joints are out of alignment should you consider tucking your tailbone to prevent movement in your lower back.

If your pelvis is aligned and your lower back is healthy, then it is safe and perhaps necessary to learn how to access the natural flexibility of this area of your body. By nutating your sacrum and engaging your back muscles, you create space between the vertebrae that allows you to bend backward safely. Place careful emphasis on engaging your pelvic floor to support your sacrum and spine. Conscious activation of the area known as Mula Bandha makes this posture not only safe, but also healing, for the lumbar spine.

Rotate your thighs inward and relax your buttocks to give even more space to your lower back and sacrum. On every inhalation, feel the center of your sternum rising, your shoulder blades spreading away from each other, the front of your body elongating, the back of your body supporting you, and your pelvis shifting farther forward. Lift the whole rib cage equally, and be sure not to poke out the floating ribs too much. Allow your head to continue the spinal extension, and gently drop it back.



Figure 6.20

Avoid tensing your neck. It is the internal rotation of your shoulders that supports your neck in extension. If you feel compression in your neck, it may be due to misalignment in your shoulders.

Press the inner edges of your knees into the ground to accentuate the inward rotation of your thighs. Gently press the tops of your toes into the ground to keep your feet engaged. After five breaths, inhale as you bring your hands to your waist. Raise back to the preparatory position, leading with your hips and allowing your body to follow so that your head is the last thing to come up. If you lead with your head, you may compress your neck or shorten your breath. If possible, return to standing on your knees in one inhalation, keeping your hands on your waist. If necessary, support your lower back by pressing your thumbs into your sacrum as in the modified preparatory posture noted earlier (see fig. 6.20). Exhale with your hands on your waist to settle into the pose, and engage your pelvic floor.

Place your hands on the floor in alignment with your knees. Inhale and lift your knees into your chest, roll your thighs even farther inward, allow your feet to rise off the floor, squeeze your heels toward your pelvis, activate your abdominal muscles, and come to a balance for a breath (see fig. 6.4). If you cannot hold your weight off the ground in this "lift-up" position, you can modify it by bringing both of your knees into your chest and lifting one foot off the ground in the method outlined after Pasasana (see fig. 6.6). Practicing the lift-up after backbends helps reset your spine and release your lower back. Even if you cannot lift all the way up, regular practice will build your core strength and protect your back from injury.

Do not skip this step, especially if you feel weak—place extra emphasis on it. Also, do not just jump up; work on the slow, steady accumulation of core strength from down low. After you lift as much as possible, exhale and float back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll backward to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BENEFITS

Helps relieve the symptoms of mild respiratory disorders

Improves digestion

Improves circulation

Strengthens cardiovascular function

Strengthens and stretches the back

LAGHUVAJRASANA

Little Thunderbolt Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Whereas Ustrasana is known as a relatively easy posture, Laghuvajrasana is quite the opposite. While all the previous backbends have worked slowly to open the spine and warm up the back, hips, thighs, and shoulders, Laghuvajrasana builds strength and steadiness in backbends. This is a strengthening posture, not a stretch, and it is important that you think of it in those terms. Regular practice will test your mental as well as your physical endurance.



Figure 6.21

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale and jump forward directly into a kneeling position. Land as softly as possible by pulling your knees in as close to your torso as possible and activating your core. Stack your hips, torso, shoulders, and head directly over your knees so that you are standing on your knees, keeping the chin tucked. Exhale and place your hands on your waist in preparation, but do not start bending backward yet. Inhale again to create space between your vertebrae, suck in your stomach, thrust your pelvis forward, and ground your legs. Arch your back slightly as though you were

going to enter Ustrasana, but allow your knees to bend while firming your quadriceps; keeping your knees hip-width apart, take hold of your ankles.

Align your hands so your thumbs point in and your fingers point out. Press into your wrists to flatten them as much as possible, so the heels of your hands slide along the inside edges of your heels (see fig. 6.21). If you clasp your ankles in any other way, the alignment of the pose will be challenged when you enter, and you will not be able to keep your arms straight in the full pose.

Be sure to push down into your wrists while gripping your fingertips, but avoid pulling with your fingers or arms. Instead, push down with your arms and hands, and roll your shoulders forward into internal rotation to create the space you need to go back. Once you have the correct hand and shoulder position, bend your knees while firming your quadriceps to move backward diagonally. Do not try to arch your spine any more than it already is. Instead, think about elongating your body backward with the power and strength of your thighs and pelvic floor. Keep your elbows totally straight, and exhale as you place your head gently on the floor (see fig. 6.22).



Figure 6.22

A slight shift of your hands toward your calves is okay, but do not shift them too high toward the backs of your knees or let your elbows bend at all. Use the strength of your quadriceps and core to control the movement the entire way down, and do your best not to crash-land on the floor. Once your head touches the ground, do not give up and lie back; maintain the strength and structural integrity of your alignment to stabilize the posture. Try not to let your knees come off the ground, but if they do, keep the alignment of the pose controlled by drawing your knees toward each other and pressing in toward the floor as soon as your head touches it.

If you have a hard time controlling the downward movement, try going only halfway down and holding your body there for five breaths as a way to build the strength in your legs, back, and core necessary for the full posture (see fig. 6.23). This is also a great way to practice the movement for coming out of the pose. You can work to get progressively closer and closer to the floor until you can control the top of your head reaching the floor. Once you have mastered that movement, you have the power and strength for full Laghuvajrasana.

Another way to build the strength for the full posture is to go all the way down, even if you land abruptly, and hold the pose for up to fifteen breaths. This builds mental as well as physical endurance. Over time, you will develop the strength to go down and come up with control.

Going down is actually the easy part of this pose. Coming up is the true test of strength. Even if you can go down with control, once your head reaches the floor, it is tempting to merely let it sink into the ground. If you release the support of your legs and pelvic floor, you will find it extremely challenging to get back up. Usually when you release fully into the ground, the mind also quits. You can never quit in this posture, even if it seems impossible to keep going. You have to learn to find strength and apply technique even when it seems there is no way to get the desired result. Remember that you are building the courageous heart of backbending, and you must put in the foundational work to build the strength you need. Laghuvajrasana teaches you mental endurance as well as physical strength.

Once you can do this posture regularly, you will understand what it means to practice with nonattachment. When your head touches the floor and you feel you have no chance of completing the movement, you have to learn to try anyway and surrender your attachment to the goal. Follow the technique already outlined to learn how to go down without going down—in other words, how to go down with support along the way and never collapse backward. Maintain the feeling of lifting, even as you stay in the posture for five breaths.



Figure 6.23

The technique for coming back up starts with remembering that Laghuvajrasana is a strengthening pose. You did not try to bring your head close to your feet or deepen the arch in your spine when you descended. Your quadriceps are engaged and your pelvic floor firmed to support your hips and lower back. Your thighs are rotated inward to free your sacrum, and your gluteal muscles have released slightly.

The first step in coming out of the pose is to think of shifting your body forward, not up. While you are down in the posture, start by grounding the inner edges of your knees while firming your thighs. Find your tailbone and engage your pelvic floor. Then inhale as you send your hips and tailbone forward over the solid foundation of your legs. Press the heels of your hands into your ankles, and allow your body to follow this forward direction.

There will be a natural moment when your hips are stacked over your knees and your spine will roll all the way back to standing; at this moment, you should allow your head to follow so that it is the last thing to return to vertical. As with coming out of Urdhva Danurasana, if you try to "stand up," the head often leads, which creates heaviness and strain. Use the natural momentum of shifting your weight forward into your legs to allow your spine to roll up in a series of kinetic movements. Start this kinetic chain with your knees and feet pressing into the ground, followed by your thighs and pelvic floor firming, then your hips and tailbone shifting forward, and finally your spine and head rolling up to return to the initial point of the posture.

Do not bend your elbows or pull with your arms on the way up, or you will lose the connection of your body through this kinetic movement chain of command. What often happens when the elbows bend is that students immediately try to pull their body up with their hands and fingers. This is an ill-conceived motion that nearly always leads to failure, back pain, and neck strain. Rather than orienting toward the goal of getting up, surrender to the inner work of the posture, and allow yourself to build the strength and stamina to do the movement correctly before proceeding.

If you cannot master this full movement, do not proceed. You simply will not have the core strength to support deeper backbends. Repeat this movement three to five times every day until you get it, and then proceed to the backbending practice after your repetitions of Laghuvajrasana.

Flexible students should be especially mindful about this posture and avoid the temptation to skip over its challenging work in favor of the following asanas. Should you proceed without the stability gained from Laghuvajrasana, you risk injury to your back and shoulders, because this posture is a kind of test to build the strength and grounding in your legs and core for the next pose, which is a deep, intense backbend. The Ashtanga Yoga practice is designed to train your body systematically to do complex movements over time. Do not rush the journey.

After five deep breaths while standing on on your knees, inhale as you bring your hands to your waist. Exhale as you settle into the posture. Place your hands on the floor in alignment with your knees. Inhale and lift your knees into your chest, roll your thighs even farther inward, allow your feet to rise off the floor, squeeze your heels toward your pelvis, and come to a balance for a breath (see fig. 6.4), modifying if necessary, as outlined earlier. After you lift as much as possible, exhale and float back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll backward to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BENEFITS

Improves circulation

Strengthens cardiovascular function Strengthens the core, thighs, and back Prepares the body for deep backbends Releases the sacrum

Builds strong mental determination

KAPOTASAN A AND B

King Pigeon Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Some poses can inspire fear just by thinking about them. If you do not have a naturally flexible spine, imagining that you will have to practice a posture like Kapotasana can bring up many different shades of emotion, ranging from denial, avoidance, and anxiety to sadness, vulnerability, and sheer panic. Even yogis who are naturally flexible are challenged to enter this pose with correct alignment in the way outlined by the Ashtanga Yoga method.

Some students have asked why we have to do something so extreme as part of a spiritual path to inner awareness. When done with healthy technique and practiced with patience and nonattachment, Kapotasana is a journey right to the bottom of the pool of your own subconscious mind, so if you master this posture, you will have attained a certain level of mastery of yourself.

When a pose is as challenging as Kapotasana, the first lesson to learn is that you cannot fight with your body to go deeper. You have to learn how to remain clear and equanimous while surrendering your mental armor and releasing physical tension. Very few postures provide such a clear mirror to the inner obstacles that we carry. One of the basic lessons of Ashtanga Yoga is that instead of running from difficulty, you learn how to be brave in the midst of the world falling apart around you. Kapotasana is meant to provide a laboratory for you to experience yourself at your uppermost limits of stress. If you have not felt that the Intermediate Series is Hell Week yet, you should feel it now. If you feel yourself descending into the darkest places in your body and mind, and that journey brings up a host of negative emotions and intense physical sensations, then have faith that you are on the right path.

In one guided Second Series class I took with Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, all my buttons were pressed. Whereas normally each posture is only held for a count of five breaths, this particular day Guruji decided to hold only Kapotasana for an extraordinary amount of time. I started counting my breaths, and as I reached ten, I started to feel anxiety about how long I would have to be in the pose. As I reached twenty breaths, I started to bargain and see if I could lessen the depth of the posture. At thirty breaths, anxiety and panic set in, accompanied by rapid breathing and increased heat throughout my body. At forty-five breaths, my mind went to the dark space of self-defeat and I nearly quit. But I stayed, perhaps out of respect for my teacher, and suddenly everything was okay, all the pain cleared, and I could breathe again.

The lesson I learned is that just on the other side of all the negativity is a peaceful, equanimous strength that has the ability to carry you through all challenges. While there was certainly physical discomfort (in other words, it wasn't easy), throughout the kaleidoscope of strong emotions my mind remained clear enough to observe that there was no physical pain that would lead to injury. The lesson of Kapotasana is the spiritual trajectory that carries you through doubt into courage, through anxiety into peace. It is your own heroic epic straight through your inner minefield. At the end of the path is the soft, steady strength of wisdom, love, and compassion.

It is not a coincidence that this is the first of the gateway poses of the Intermediate Series. Kapotasana demands a deep level of flexibility combined with the strength to support your body in this intense posture. Some students have stayed at Kapotasana for as long as ten years to work on the alignment and energetics of the movement before moving on. Even naturally flexible students will find that performing this pose as part of their six-days-a-week practice requires a high level of skill and dedication. Do not rush through this posture or avoid the strong emotions or intense physical sensations it invokes, as both are completely normal and part of the cleansing benefit of the practice. Burning sensations in your muscles are part of the reality of working the limits of strength and flexibility.

Despite the need to accept intensity, you should never damage or injure your body. If you feel any sharp, pinching sensations in your joints, especially around your spine or shoulders, come out of the pose immediately. This is not an indication to go deeper, but an indication that your technique may be out of alignment. Do not push too hard, or you will lose the heightened sensitivity necessary to feel your inner body. Your mind has to be clear and precise to differentiate between physical or emotional intensity and pain that is a precusor of injury. The most intense yoga postures, even Kapotasana, will never require you to injure yourself. What is required is a patient determination to stay the course, no matter how long it takes.

At this point in the practice of the Intermediate Series, a substantive change in the quality of your daily practice will start to take place because you will be increasing the energy flow along your spinal column. This added charge to the nervous system elevates your resting metabolic rate and raises the spiritual vibration of your body and mind. Do not worry if your sleep patterns are disturbed for a short time as you adjust to the new, heightened flow of energy. You will also have a longer practice that will demand more energy, so do not be surprised if you feel especially tired throughout the day.

Assuming that my Kapotasana war stories have not sent you running for the door but rising to the challenge, we are ready to begin. From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale and jump forward directly into a kneeling position. Land as softly as possible by pulling your knees in as close to your torso as possible and activating your core. Stack your hips, torso, shoulders, and head directly over your knees so that you are standing on your knees. Exhale and place your hands on your waist in preparation, but do not start bending backward yet. Inhale again to create space between your vertebrae, suck in your stomach, thrust your pelvis forward, and ground your legs. Arch your back slightly, as though you are going to enter Ustrasana. Place your hands in prayer position at your sternum, roll the shoulders forward, lift your chest, drop your head back, and ground your legs more firmly (see fig. 6.24).

The most traditional and advanced entry into Kapotasana asks you to arch your whole body backward and, in one harmonious exhalation, rotate your shoulders externally, grab your heels with your hands, lower your elbows to the ground, roll your thighs inward, engage your quadriceps, firm your pelvic floor, and maintain the space between your vertebrae (see fig. 6.25). Very few students can do this movement successfully, and no student who is new to this posture should attempt this method. If you are new or not naturally flexible in your back, you will need to break this movement down into many different steps.



Figure 6.24

The easiest way to enter Kapotasana is to slow down the movement and take many extra breaths along the way to give your body and mind space to strengthen and open. If you rush the process, chances are you will compress your spine or disturb your nervous system, even if you are naturally bendy in your back. Starting off in the kneeling preparatory position where you have created space in and elongated your body, exhale as you bend your elbows, roll your shoulders forward, and press your thumbs into your sacrum (see fig. 6.20). Take a few breaths, and proceed *only* when your body and mind are relaxed here and you can breathe steadily.



Figure 6.25

If you feel comfortable, take your hands into prayer position at your sternum as indicated earlier, and take two to five breaths to open your spine (see fig. 6.24). For your back to be safe in this deep spinal extension, it is crucial that you have the strength to support your flexibility. The next series of movements tests your physical endurance, so be careful not to rush. If you are ready to progress deeper, inhale as you roll your elbows toward each other, extend your arms over the top of your head, gently drop your head back, thrust your hips farther forward, and ground your thighs (see fig. 6.26). If you feel short of breath, consciously activate a deeper breath by employing the deep breathing with sound that is the essence of the Ashtanga Yoga method. Hang over backward for two to five breaths to open your shoulders and allow the backbend to be distributed throughout your entire body. Allow your hands to reach toward your heels, and look for your toes in your field of vision.



Figure 6.26

If you feel a pinching around any of your vertebrae, come up immediately and return your thumbs to your sacrum for support. Sharp sensations around the joints of your spine are an indication that you do not yet have the strength to support the movement. Stay longer in the preparatory poses to build strength before proceeding. If you feel your back muscles and thighs working powerfully and your heart and shoulders opening, that is the essence of the movement, and you can continue with confidence.



Figure 6.27

If you can see your feet, you can most likely place your hands directly on your heels (see fig. 6.27). Reach for your heels directly by keeping your shoulders externally rotated with your elbows drawn in throughout your attempt. If your shoulders wing out to the sides when you try to grab your heels, do not proceed or you risk damaging your shoulders over time. To grab your heels directly from the air, it is necessary to create and keep spaciousness between your vertebrae and control the rotation of your shoulders while powerfully pressing your hips forward. Advanced students should eventually enter Kapotasana in this manner and use the same method to go deeper. Sometimes the help of a teacher can be extremely beneficial in making the transition to entering the pose directly from the air.



Figure 6.28

Most students, however, will not see their heels from the hanging position (see fig. 6.26), nor will they be able to hover their hands above their heels. In this case, you will to proceed in a different manner toward the full expression of Kapotasana. If you can see your yoga mat, you can gently drop your hands to the floor directly from the hanging position (see fig. 6.28). To do this, you need all the strength you developed in Laghuvajrasana. Exhale as you shift your hips only as far back as necessary to allow your hands to reach the floor. Keep your pelvis and legs engaged, just as you did in Laghuvajrasana. If you cannot see your yoga mat, do not proceed because you will land too hard and risk compressing your spine.

Once you land on your yoga mat, the real work begins. While it is tempting to let your weight sink into your hands, you must keep it forward in your legs. The activation of your pelvic floor must stay firm to keep your hips lifted forward; otherwise, your lower back will shorten and compress. Keep your arms relatively straight and allow only a minimal bend in your elbows. With the weight of your body held forward and your head raised off the ground, crawl your fingertips toward your feet, keeping your shoulders stringently in external rotation. If your head touches the ground, you will not be able to go deeper, but if you need a rest and your thighs and back are getting fatigued, it is okay to rest for one breath on the top of your head (see fig. 6.29). However,

do not attempt to walk your hands toward your feet from this position. To walk your hands in and go deeper into the posture, you have to send your hips forward dramatically, lift your head off the floor, and send your hips forward again before walking your hands closer to your feet. You can repeat this step of lifting up, walking in, and resting on your head as many times as you have the strength for it.



Figure 6.29

At some point, you will start to see or feel your toes; this is the second temptation. Do not try to walk up the soles of your feet to your heels because your feet are slippery and do not provide good traction. If you reach for your heels directly along the soles of your feet, you may lose the support of your pelvis. Instead, walk your hands along the outside of your feet until your fingers are aligned with your anklebones (see fig. 6.30). Only then is it safe to place your hands on your heels. When you attempt to catch your heels, send your pelvis even farther forward, press your toes into the ground, and spider-walk the fingers of your right hand along the crest of your right ankle and hold your heel. Maintain the forward direction and lift in your hips. As soon as you grab onto your right heel, wrap your fingers around it and clasp it as firmly as possible while thrusting the heel of your hand into the heel.



Figure 6.30

Next, spider-walk the fingers of your left hand up along the crest of your left ankle and repeat until you are holding both heels with your head off the ground and your elbows only slightly bent (see fig. 6.27). Take a breath here to consolidate the activation of your pelvic floor and deepen your spinal extension. Exhale as you slowly lower your head toward the ground, roll your thighs inward, thrust your pelvis forward, and keep your pelvic floor engaged, and squeeze your elbows toward each other to facilitate inward rotation. Stay in this pose for a minimum of five breaths.

If you cannot reach your heels, go as far as possible and repeat up to three times each day until the posture deepens. Control your emotional state by applying the three tools of the Tristhana method: breath, posture, and focal point. While holding Kapotasana, your nervous system may become stressed, which may manifest as shortened or accelerated breathing, feelings of anxiety or claustrophobia, intense negative emotions, or shaking and trembling limbs. Should you encounter any of these sensations, remain calm and clear in your mind. Do not, under any circumstances, rush out of the posture without following the proper technique or you risk injuring yourself. If you notice that your nervous system is stressed and your mind is losing its balance, exit the pose slowly and consciously to rest for a moment and then try again. Very advanced students who are proficient at performing Kapotasana can take the posture deeper. Once you can catch onto your heels from the air, apply the same techniques already described to walk your hands along the backs of your calves toward your knees. Once you have gotten your fingers as close to the backs of your knees as possible, exhale and settle your elbows to the ground (see fig. 6.31). You should never attempt this if you are not already catching your ankles in Urdhva Danurasana. If you are not familiar with that movement, do not attempt this deeper version. Since you will not have your heels to hold on to, it will be even harder to stabilize the pose. You will need to engage your core and legs even more while elongating the space between your vertebrae to hold yourself in the deepest Kapotasana.



Figure 6.31

After settling into Kapotasana for five breaths, release your heels while keeping your shoulders aligned. Straighten your arms and press your hands into the ground as close to the outside of your feet as possible (see fig. 6.32). Point your fingers toward your feet as you straighten your arms and thrust your pelvis strongly forward. Be especially conscious of the external rotation of your shoulders, which will keep your elbows spiraling toward your ears. Draw your thighs inward while thrusting your knees into the ground. Keep your feet active, and lift your spine up and out of your pelvic floor. Send your hips forward to lift your body, just as you did in Laghuvajrasana. This second stage of Kapotasana is just as challenging as the first and should not be rushed or skipped. Stay here for at least five breaths, then inhale as you return your hands to prayer position (see fig. 6.24).



Figure 6.32

If you need added support to exit the posture, press your thumbs into your sacrum before returning your hands to prayer position (see fig. 6.20). If your back feels strong enough, inhale as you roll through prayer position at your sternum to place your hands directly on your waist (see fig. 6.18). Exhale there to settle into the pose. Place your hands on the floor in alignment with your knees. Inhale and lift your knees into your chest, roll your thighs farther inward, allow your feet to rise off the floor, squeeze your heels toward your pelvis, and come to a balance for a breath (see fig. 6.4), modifying if necessary as outlined earlier. After you lift as much as possible, exhale and float back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll backward to Adho Mukha Svanasana.



Figure 6.33

Even though this traditional vinyasa may seem extremely challenging after such a deep backbend, it is crucial to reset your spine and release any tension or compression that may have accumulated around your sacrum and lower back. If you need some additional time to collect yourself, you can rest in Balasana (Child's Pose; see fig. 6.33) to catch your breath before proceeding. If you cannot complete this posture, do not proceed further. Instead, go immediately to the backbends and closing postures sequences.

BENEFITS

Helps relieve the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and panic

Improves digestion and elimination

Improves circulation

Strengthens cardiovascular function

Strengthens and stretches the back, shoulder, and psoas muscles
Strengthens the nervous system

SUPTA VAJRASANA

Sleeping Thunderbolt Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, jump forward through your arms to come to a seated position with your legs straight. Exhale and fold your legs into Padmasana (Full Lotus Pose), right foot first. Bind your lotus position by reaching your hands around your back and holding your left foot with your left hand and your right foot with your right hand (see fig. 6.34). Be sure to hold your left foot first and arch your back to reach your hands closer to your feet. Do not lean forward as in Yoga Mudra from the closing postures, because you will need a deep spinal extension to enter Supta Vajrasana. Open your chest, rotate your shoulders outward, bend into your hip joints, and nutate your sacrum to provide a stable foundation.



Figure 6.34

Grabbing hold of your feet while in Padmasana is only the start. To stabilize your grip, press your hands firmly into your feet and reach your toes forward in a demi-point. Cross your elbows over each other behind your back by arching your back deeply, and rotate your shoulders inward while lifting your chest. Only once you have fully bound your lotus position are you ready to begin. Note that while technically the starting point for Supta Vajrasana is a bound lotus—also sometimes known as Baddha Padmasana—it is a totally different movement initiation and activation than used in the Closing Posture, which links Baddha Padmasana and Yoga Mudra together.



Figure 6.35

If you find this movement challenging, it may be helpful to sit in Baddha Padmasana for five breaths before starting. If your feet are slippery, try placing a towel over your feet before attempting to enter the position. If you cannot do Padmasana, and this is the first time you are learning this posture, do not move on. If you are already proficient in this pose but develop an injury that prevents you from taking Padmasana, it is possible to modify by merely crossing your legs and reaching your hands around toward your thighs. If you can do Padmasana but cannot properly bind your feet, work diligently on achieving the bind before moving on to dropping back into the full pose.

Supta Vajrasana is most easily entered with the help of an assistant to hold your knees down (see fig. 6.35). If you do not have someone to help you, you can place your knees under a bench, a sofa, or some other item that is heavy enough to hold your weight without placing too much pressure on your knees. If you are very flexible, you may be able to enter the whole movement on your own (see fig. 6.36). Having stabilized your knees, inhale to create space between your vertebrae, lift your sternum, and firm up your pelvic floor.

Exhale and lean into the space you have created to reach the top of your head to the floor. Press your hands down as you bend backward. If possible, keep your elbows off the floor throughout the movement.

If you can bind your hands to your feet but are unable to maintain your grip while moving backward, you have a few options to teach you how to work through this. First, only go down as far as you can while keeping hold of your feet and pressing your knees flat into the ground. A second technique is to maintain the bind of hands to feet while allowing your knees to elevate only as much as necessary for you to maintain the bind on the way down and up. The third way is either to grab a strap or towel to assist the bind or to hold the hands of an assistant when entering the posture.



Figure 6.36

Stay down for five deep breaths while pressing firmly on your feet and reaching your toes forward. If you relax your grip on your toes, your hands will slide out of the pose and compromise your ability to come out. Next, inhale and come back up while maintaining the bind, rolling your spine upward from the base and ending with the top of your head. Exhale and drop your head back to the floor, then immediately come back up. Repeat this three times in succession without pausing between breaths. Then exhale and drop your head back to floor; hold the posture again for five breaths. Inhale and lift your spine to return to Baddha Padmasana. Exhale and settle into the pose. Release your feet. Inhale and lift your Padmasana off the ground. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, the exhale and roll backward to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Performing this pose at the end of the intensive backbending series that starts the Intermediate Series allows your spine to release gently through the pattern of spinal extension as opposed to activating into that same pattern in the previous postures. By rolling your shoulders inward, you stretch and release your shoulders from the deep movement that Kapotasana demanded. Practicing Supta Vajrasana also prepares your hips to be open and strong simultaneously, engaged and externally rotated. Mastering this action of the hips and core prepares you for the more advanced postures yet to come such as Karandavasana. Bending backward in the lotus position stretches your psoas muscles and resets the core of your body. Do not brush over the importance of binding your hands and entering the full posture. Note that some other styles of yoga call Supta Vajrasana a variation on Supta Virasana. In the Ashtanga Yoga practice, Supta Vajrasana is only done with a fully bound lotus position. The sleeping thunderbolt (which was Lord Indra's weapon) is a powerful image that conjures the demanding strength that this posture requires.

BENEFITS

Stabilizes the spine

Stretches the shoulders

Activates the feet and fingers Helps relieve the symptoms of mild respiratory disorders Improves digestion

BAKASANA A

Crane Pose A

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Bakasana signifies a transition into the next series of poses in the Intermediate Series and plays a crucial role in realigning your spine and preparing your body for the subsequent postures. This foundational arm balance is used in the Ashtanga Yoga method for transitions in all four series that are a part of my daily practice. But the only time the posture is held on its own for a solid five breaths is here in the Second Series. Once you master the combination of core strength and solid structural foundation in your shoulder girdle that this posture requires, you will be able to move easily into other, more challenging arm balances. Practicing Bakasana directly after the deep backbends is like doing an active Balasana while balancing on your arms. The active engagement of your core while rounding your back and pressing up with your shoulders coaxes your hips to flex, draws your thighs into an inward rotation, and releases your sacrum.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump forward to a squatting position, keeping the base of your big toes touching. Strengthen your arms and place your hands shoulder-width apart. While the traditional gaze is at the nose, you may find it useful to gaze at the floor slightly ahead of your fingers when you are first learning the posture. Extend your shoulders, firm your deltoids, activate your pectoralis minor muscles, engage your latissimus dorsi muscles, and grip your fingertips gently on the floor. Lift your knees into your armpits, and lean forward onto the solid foundation of your arms (see fig. 6.37). Avoid dumping your weight into your arms or flattening your back. Lean your weight into the strength of your shoulders and the core of your body by lifting up while you move forward in space. Suck your lower ribs in toward the center of your body and, as you activate the serratus anterior, think of it as layering into the muscular contraction of the lower ribs. Firm your pelvic floor, tigthten your abs, bend your knees, and allow your hips to flex. Round your upper back slightly as you lean farther forward, but do not allow your deltoids to go too far past your fingertips. Inhale and allow your feet to float off the ground while you pull your toes up toward your pelvis, tucking your tailbone (see fig. 6.38). Roll the bases of your big toes toward each other and keep your heels in contact. Stay in the posture for five

breaths while pulling everything in toward your center. Lift up higher with each breath as you thrust strongly through your hands into the ground, as though pushing the floor away from you. Push your knees into your armpits while pulling your pubic bone forward toward your navel to activate your lower abs.



Figure 6.37

Imagine that you are at the top of a skyscraper and that when you push down, your strength pushes the top story of the building all the way into the ground. In this way, your strength will tap into the natural strength of the earth's gravitational axis. When your energy reaches the center of the earth, it bounces back and returns to your body as a feeling of liftedness. The more you can connect your efforts to the natural energy lines of life, the easier your posture will become. Rather than using mere brute force, allow your body to be stacked as close to its natural center line as possible, and whenever you feel off-center, use your muscles not merely to push out, but to draw in toward the energy center of your body.



Figure 6.38

In the transitions of the Primary Series it is not really necessary to differentiate between the Crow and the Crane, and at this level of practice they can be used interchangeably. However, when you progress to the Second Series, it is crucial that you understand the difference between these two asanas. Sometimes Bakasana is referred to as Crow Pose. These are actually two distinct postures. Bakasana refers to the pose with straight arms and is translated as Crane Pose (see fig. 6.38), while Kakasana (Crow Pose) refers to the version with bent elbows that is both easier and closer to the ground (see fig. 6.39). Students with less natural strength will find Bakasana nearly impossible, so you can use Kakasana as a modification until you develop the strength through your core, stability in your shoulders, and flexibility in your wrists that you need for Bakasana.

When working on Kakasana, your knees should be aligned on the outer edges of your upper arms, not in your armpits as in Bakasana. Bend your elbows in line with your wrists, and squeeze your legs toward each other to keep them firmly planted on the shelf of your upper arms. Lean your weight forward while thrusting into your foundation. Avoid letting your elbows wing too far out to the sides; actively draw your elbows inward to keep them in line with your wrists. Since your elbows are bent, your upper arms form a shelf that your shins can rest on, which is both the benefit and the disadvantage of the posture. If you rest too much on the friction provided by the alignment of Kakasana, you will compromise your shoulders and not develop the strength necessary to perform Bakasana. Keep the same activation through your shoulders, chest, torso, and core as indicated for Bakasana. When you feel stable in Kakasana, press strongly through your hands from your pelvic floor and see if you can straighten your arms as much as possible while tightening your abs and lifting your hips to transform Kakasana into Bakasana (this may take many years of practice).



Figure 6.39

When beginning your practice of Bakasana, you may notice that your wrists get fatigued quickly. Start off slowly and build up the pose over time. If you feel sharp, pinching sensations in any of your hand joints, come out of the posture, check the alignment of your hands, and rest before proceeding. Be conscious of the position of your hands and fingers. Keep your fingers pointed straight ahead, your wrists perpendicular to your torso and aligned with your public bone, and your fingertips engaged. Place your fingers in a neutral position, not too close together and not too far apart. Imagine that the center of each palm is the center of a traditional clock. Place the thumb of your right hand at ten o'clock and the little finger at two o'clock; mirror this position with your left hand. Do not turn your hands out to the side or spread

your fingers too far apart, because that will place unhealthy stress on your wrists and the tendons of your fingers. Place your fingers and wrists so they are in line with the natural center line of your body; this allows you to stack your body weight more easily.

If you notice yourself wearing pants because you rely on the friction of the material to hold your body in the correct posture, see if you can challenge yourself to wear shorts so you eventually learn how to hold your weight off the ground with only the strength of your body. Wearing shorts is even more effective when you are sweaty, because the effort it takes to resist slipping down your arms is the fastest way to build the core strength you need to pull into your center and lift more powerfully. Holding your best version of the pose both in daily practice and throughout the transitions for a few extra breaths will also help you build strength and steadiness in body and mind. While it is tempting to go quickly through arm balances, the opposite attitude will improve your practice. Stay longer in the difficult postures, and they will become your best teacher. Learn to accept the adversity, and it will make you stronger. If you run from the challenge of Bakasana, you will most likely have to return to it repeatedly, since it is a fundamental posture that teaches healthy shoulder alignment and core strength. Better just to face it now and develop courage along the way.

After at least five breaths, inhale as you lean farther forward onto your arms, push the floor away from you more strongly, engage your core even more, and lift slightly off your arms. Bend your arms only if necessary to shift your weight farther forward, but keep the stability in your shoulders and keep your elbows in line with your wrists. Exhale as your lower ribs pull in toward your center, your thighs squeeze toward each other, and both of your legs float directly back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and move into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Jumping back from Bakasana is generally learned during the transitions after Bhujapidasana (Shoulder Pressing Pose) and Supta Kurmasana, two poses in the Primary Series. It is even easier to jump directly back from Bakasana than from these transitional movements. If you feel totally stuck on your arms, a great way to generate the momentum to jump back is to dip a little bit into your shoulders and then push the floor away from you while sending your hips up and your legs back. If you cannot jump back from the posture, do not

proceed further. Allow your strength to build slowly and perhaps place more emphasis on strength throughout your whole practice.

Sometimes the only real obstacle to jumping back from Bakasana is fear. If this is the case, you will need to learn how to lean your weight forward safely. One way to get over the fear of falling forward is to enter Bakasana and lean so far forward that the top of your head presses into the ground as though you are in Mukta Hasta Sirsasana (Tripod Headstand). Going this far will teach your body and mind that it is safe to experiment with leaning forward into space, which is necessary to jump all the way back.

BENEFITS

Releases the sacrum

Builds core strength Strengthens the wrists, shoulders, and chest Increases self-confidence

BAKASANA B

Crane Pose B

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

If jumping back from Bakasana invoked any fear or uncertainty, jumping into Bakasana will seem like a magic trick that only members of the Cirque du Soleil can really perform. Not only did this movement bring up a tremendous amount of uncertainty for me, it also tested my beliefs about what strength really meant to me and my practice. By breaking down the key elements of the movement, I can say absolutely that if you can jump back from Bakasana you can also jump into it. If you put in the work and surrender to the journey while letting go of the need to achieve the posture in any particular time frame, it will unfold much faster than you can imagine. The first trick is to be humble enough to put in the work wherever you are. Do not start off trying to float into the posture from a hovering handstand. Be happy with whatever crash-landing version of Bakasana B is available to you and start there. That's what I did!



Figure 6.40

Starting off in Adho Mukha Svanasana, the most advanced and traditional way to enter Bakasana B is to jump directly into the posture on one long inhalation (see fig. 6.38). This takes emotional confidence, physical control,

and mental discipline. If you have all the tools for the pose, you may be able to jump directly into Bakasana. Look forward, spotting between your fingers on the mat. Press your hands into the floor, initiating the movement from your core. Firm your deltoids, engage your latissimus dorsi, and activate your pelvic floor. Bend your knees deeply to pull back and generate momentum, just as you would when you jump through to a seated position. Then jump forward and send your pelvis, chest, and shoulders forward, while pressing even more strongly into the ground, keeping your arms straight, and pulling your weight in toward your center. Squeeze your knees into your chest and feel the weight pouring down through your arms (see fig. 6.40). Once your knees are touching your chest begin to round your back. Do not jump too high or try to do a handstand. Just jump forward at about a forty-five-degree angle from the floor and follow that movement until you land on your arms. Exhale as you engage your abs, send your shoulders forward, and let your hips move down to land in Bakasana. When you land, try not to crash into the backs of your arms. Resist the urge to go down while you lower your knees toward your arms. Press up with your shoulders the whole time. Stay here for five breaths.

If you think it is impossible to jump into Bakasana, make it easier with a few easy steps. Shorten the distance that you have to jump by walking your feet close to your hands. Instead of jumping all the way from Adho Mukha Svanasana, attempt the jump from much closer, perhaps starting only six inches away from your arms (see fig. 6.41). Holding this preparatory position for even five breaths will build shoulder strength. Keep your deltoids over your palms, bend your elbows, and inhale to jump forward and land in Kakasana rather than the highly lifted and more elegant Bakasana. Giving yourself the shelf of your upper arms to land on creates a larger surface for your weight to move to. Instead of jumping your knees directly into your armpits, you can jump your shins to the safe plane of your triceps and balance much more easily.



Figure 6.41

After you succeed in consistently jumping onto your arms from a short distance for one month, move back one inch every month, and after about a year you will be able to jump fully into Bakasana from Adho Mukha Svanasana. If you successfully land in Kakasana, see if you can thrust into your foundation while lifting your hips and straightening your arms as much as possible. One additional thing that sometimes helps is to place a large pillow where your head would land if you fell too far forward. Just knowing that you can land on something soft will help you develop the confidence to jump forward into Bakasana.

Finally, practice falling forward and landing on your head in the Mukta Hasta Sirsasana position. Going into the very thing that scares you without getting injured creates the confidence to try. Try at least three times but no more than five each day. If you do not succeed after five attempts, practice nonattachment and let it go. Remain in your best version of Bakasana for at least five breaths, exhale and jump directly back into Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and move into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Many students fail to jump into Bakasana because they create mental obstacles around the posture, either placing too much emphasis on it or quitting somewhere along the journey toward strength. Find the perfect balance between effort and relaxation, and you will one day float forward into Bakasana. The purpose of this movement is not necessarily to lower with the control of a gymnast. Rather, you need to learn two things: first, how to transfer your weight forward into the solid foundation of your arms and core, and second, how to trust moving forward from the back of your body. You cannot see where your hips are going, and jumping into Bakasana requires you to develop a kind of blind faith and trust. It does not have to be pretty, but it does need to feel connected and strong. It also does not matter how well you do the pose, but it does matter how well you try. Do not rush the development of strength or create stress around doing the posture. Simply put in your best effort and then surrender your attachment to any particular outcome. If you focus on the technique, your body will automatically get stronger over many years of practice.

BENEFITS

Releases the sacrum

Builds core strength Strengthens the wrists, shoulders, and chest Increases self-confidence Prepares the body for handstands

BHARADVAJASANA

Pose Dedicated to Bharadvaja

Drishti: Parsva (Side)

This pose is dedicated to Bharadvaja, one of seven legendary rishis credited with composing the hymns collected in the Vedas. Postures named after the great sages of India are said to align the practitioner with the spiritual state of that particular sage. Bharadvaja is one of the seven great rishis know as the Saptarishis. He is a descendant of Rishi Angirasa and is credited with the composition of the sixth mandala in the *Rig Veda*. He is renowned for his scholastic endeavors, study of Ayurveda, and accomplishments in meditation.

After the deep backbends that precede it, the twisting in Bharadvajasana plays an important role in resetting your spine to a neutral position. While twisting is also a type of spinal extension, the twisting movement in the next two poses of the Intermediate Series are meant to bring your energy back toward the central axis of your body. When entering the posture, think about drawing all of your muscular activation in toward your center. While it can be tempting to spin your energy outward, the beneficial nature of Bharadvajasana comes from literally twisting into your center. Once your energy flows along your spinal column, you will experience the heightened inner awareness that comes from backbends, and your spine will be strong enough for the next series of poses.

Starting off in Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through your arms, straighten your legs, and sit down. Exhale to enter the pose, bending your left leg back and rotating it inward, drawing your right leg into a half-lotus position in external rotation, binding your right foot with your right hand, pressing your left hand on the floor under your right knee with the fingers pointed toward your left knee, and finally twisting to the right (see figs. 6.42 and 6.43). Gaze over your right shoulder. When your left leg bends backward, it is in the same manner as Krounchasana from the Intermediate Series and Tiryang Mukha Ekapada Paschimattanasana from the Primary Series. Use the internal rotation of your left hip joint to facilitate this movement while minimizing the amount of torque in your knee.



Figure 6.42



Figure 6.43

If you feel pain in your knee when doing this movement, do not push through it; back off from the posture, or modify it by elevating your hips on a towel or block. If your hip allows a deep internal rotation, try to keep your sit bones planted firmly on the floor throughout your exploration of Bharadvajasana. As your right leg moves into half-lotus position, aim the top of your right foot toward your left hip crease, again minimizing any torque in your knee and keeping the rotation in the hip socket. Once your foot is settled safely in place, activate your right foot slightly by pressing downward on your left hip crease to ground your pelvis and sit bones even more. The ideal position of your legs is a minimum of forty-five degrees apart, wider than you might at first feel comfortable with. When I first learned this posture from Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, he would often stand on my mat and move my legs wider apart, to at least a forty-five degree angle and sometimes even wider.

The whole foundation of the pose is in the legs, pelvis, and hips. Allow your hips to rotate in opposite directions while engaging your pelvic floor, grounding your sit bones, and sucking in your lower belly. Even if you feel a slight rounding in your sacrum, allow that to be part of the foundation. Do not lift your sit bones or hike your hips to get into the posture, or you will destabilize your foundation. When reaching for the hand position, start off by rolling your right shoulder blade down your back to grab your right foot. Avoid spinning your upper back or chest too far back or rolling your right shoulder too far out. Instead reach for the foot by drawing your shoulder toward the center line of your body. Once you are holding your right foot, press down gently to continue to ground your pelvis and activate your deltoid, latissimus dorsi, and serratus anterior muscles on the right side to layer the twisting motion in toward your center. Staying solid in your foundation, lean slightly forward, flex your rib cage, and twist your spine along the center line, keeping your sternum and pubic bone aligned with each other. Reach your left arm forward and internally rotate your shoulder, while allowing it to fold into the twisting action. Press the heel of your left hand firmly down under your right knee while gripping your fingertips lightly as they point toward your left knee, and fully enter Bharadvajasana on an exhalation (see fig. 6.42). It requires a high level of flexibility to place your hand down without either reaching far to the right with your spine or hiking your hips. Do your best to minimize both of these compensatory movements by drawing the twisting action in toward the center line of your body. If absolutely necessary, you can take a few breaths with your hips grounded but without your left hand in full position, and a few more breaths with your left hand grounded and your sit bones slightly elevated. If your sit bones remain grounded, create space on every inhalation and twist into that space on every exhalation.

After five breaths in Bharadvajasana, inhale as you place your hands on the floor, cross your feet, and lift up. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale, roll forward into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Inhale, jump through your arms, straighten your legs, and sit down. Exhale and move into Bharadvajasana on the left side, applying the same careful anatomical directions (see fig. 6.43). After five breaths, inhale as you place your hands on the floor, cross your feet, and lift up. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Once the energy of the pose is integrated along the center line, your prana (life energy) will travel upward along the sushumna nadi. Deep backbends awaken a powerful electrical charge that courses through your nervous system. Twisting in toward the center of your body allows you to direct that energy up along the center line. Feel the sensation of an electrical current igniting the energy centers of your spine as your prana rises along it. It is important to keep your spine as aligned and uplifted as possible so this energy runs freely and is not inhibited by any blockages. Once you successfully hold Bharadvajasana with alignment and integrity, you will feel a powerful flow of energy rising from the base of your spine at the coccyx and terminating at the top of your head.

Bharadvajasana and the next pose, Ardha Matsyendrasana, activate *samana prana vayu*, which is the equalizing prana that rests in the abdominal cavity. When samana is activated, digestion is optimized, and the mind and body are calm and equanimous. Samana is a subtle form of agni, the fire of purification that first originates as a physical fire and ultimately progresses to become the light of spiritual awareness. By practicing Bharadvajasana and Ardha Matsyendrasana after the deep backbends that start the Intermediate Series, you direct samana toward the central channel for spiritual awakening and aim it at its true and highest purpose, the dawning of the light of pure consciousness.

BENEFITS

Aligns the spine and sacrum

Opens the shoulders and chest

Relieves stress

Stimulates digestion

Activates samana

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA

Lord of the Half Fishes Pose

Drishti: Parsva (Side)

Matsyendranath is one of the eighty-four Mahasiddhas (great siddhas). His birth and origin are crafted from the myths of India's esoteric tradition. Matsyendranath's name is translated into English as "half of a fish and half of Indra," a deity in the Indian tradition. One legend says that he was swallowed by a fish only to hear Lord Shiva's teaching of a mantra while in the fish's belly. The sacred mantra saved him from death and sustained his practice for eleven years until the fish released him. Another legend says that he was created from a fish to unite the water element with the divine element of Indra, a supreme ruler. Yet another legend says that Shiva himself crafted Matsyendranath out of the five elements of life so that he would be indestructible and the perfect receptacle for Shiva's teaching.

Mentioned in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* by Swami Svatmarama, Matsyendranath is described as one of the great siddhas who broke free of the bonds of time through the practice of Hatha Yoga and attained total freedom (HYP 1.9). He is also known as the teacher of renowned yogi Gorakshanath, and the relationship between the two is presented as the ideal teacher-student relationship, a sacred and revered bond in the yoga tradition.

Finally, Matsyendranath is also listed as a Vajrayana siddha identified with Avalokiteśvara by the Tantric Buddhists of Tibet and Nepal (Andrews, 1993). As already stated, practicing postures named after great sages seeks to align the practitioner's energy with that of the sage. Placing such a powerful asana immediately after the increased prana cultivated from deep backbends indicates the importance of these two twists as a transformational part of the Intermediate Series.

Starting off in Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through your arms, straighten your legs, and sit down. Keeping your pelvis stable as the

foundation of the posture, bend your left knee while allowing your left hip to fall into a gentle external rotation. Slide the knee toward the center line of your body so that your left knee is aligned with your public bone and your left heel grazes the outer edge of your right hip. Be sure you are not sitting on your left foot; point it actively and reach out through the base of your big toe throughout the posture. Bend your right knee over your left leg and allow a gentle internal rotation of your right hip joint while keeping your pelvis stable. Press the outer edge of your right ankle into the upper, inside edge of your left knee. Align your right knee with your sternum. If you find it uncomfortable to sit in this position, you may want to take a few breaths here, working on the alignment of your legs and pelvis before proceeding further.

To enter the pose, exhale as you suck in your lower belly much as possible, lift your spine to create space between the vertebrae, and twist to the right. Initiate the twisting motion by sucking the left side of your lower belly back into the interior space of your pelvis and using this activation to lean your entire torso to the right and in, toward your right hip joint. Draw the left side of your rib cage in and toward the right, actively squeezing in toward the center line. Use this motion to fold your body into the internal rotation of your right hip joint. Roll your left shoulder forward and inward, and reach your left hand along the outer edge of your right lower leg toward your right foot. Hold on to your right foot, aligning your thumb with the base of your little toe and your index finger with the base of your big toe. Align your left deltoid with the outer edge of your right knee and press them into each other. If you cannot grab your left foot, do not proceed further. Simply work on this portion of the movement until it is stable.

If you are ready to complete the posture, lift your right arm up, roll the shoulder blade down your back, rotate your right shoulder outward, and reach your right hand around your back toward your left thigh. Once you reach your thigh, wrap your fingers around it as firmly as possible while actively pressing down to help ground your hip and bring the twisting motion into the central axis of your body. Finally, turn your head to the right and gaze in that direction to fully enter Ardha Matsyendrasana (see figs. 6.44 and 6.45). If you cannot grab your left thigh, merely reach around as far as possible, and one day your shoulders, spine, and hips will open enough to permit the full expression of the asana.

Throughout the pose, keep creating space on the inhalations and using the space on the exhalations to twist deeper in toward your center line. Feel energy rising along your spinal column, reaching out the top of your head. Let the twisting motion travel throughout the entire spine, while at the same time constantly drawing your lower ribs in. Ardha Matsyendrasana continues the cultivation of samana from the previous posture. Allow this pose to release your sacrum after deep backbends and prepare your hips and back for the deep external rotation movements that immediately follow. Actively lift your spine out of your pelvis while keeping your hips grounded. Avoid twisting your pelvis in an attempt to go deeper into the posture. Keep your sit bones pressed into the ground, even if a slight rounding of your sacrum occurs, but do not dump your weight into your lower back or round it too much. Find a perfect balance between grounding your pelvis and lifting out of the foundation of your hips into the twisting motion.



Figure 6.44


Figure 6.45

When getting into Ardha Matsyendrasana, avoid pushing too hard with your arms and instead initiate the whole movement from the root of your pelvic floor. Let your torso literally twist into its central axis, and lean to the side to facilitate the twisting motion. If you use your arms to fight your way into the pose, you will create tension when you need relaxation. Use only appropriate muscular activation, and be specific with which muscles and actions are useful to achieve the posture. Proficient students will be able to flow rapidly through the movements to enter Ardha Matsyendrasana in one fluid exhalation after jumping through to sitting. Until you reach that stage, work progressively on each step, focusing carefully on your breath and alignment. Do not rush or force your body to move too quickly through any movement.

After five breaths in Ardha Matsyendrasana, inhale as you place your hands on the floor, cross your feet, and lift up. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Inhale and jump through your arms, straighten your legs, and sit down. Exhale and move into Ardha Matsyendrasana on the opposite side, applying the same careful anatomical directions. After five breaths, inhale as you place your hands on the floor, cross your feet, and lift up. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BENEFITS

Helps relieve the symptoms of sciatica and asthma

Aligns the spine and sacrum

Opens the shoulders and chest

Relieves stress

Stimulates digestion

Activates samana

Energy Rising, Hip Opening, Legs behind the Head

PLACING YOUR LEGS BEHIND YOUR HEAD MAY BE CLOSER to something you associate with the circus than yoga, but there are many benefits to this movement. Even though it might seem a little strange at first, if you continue with daily practice of the Intermediate Series, this movement will one day be part of your morning routine. I could not put my legs behind my head when I first started, but one thing that is evident from my experience in personal practice and teaching is that the external rotation required for this movement can be attained by nearly everyone with a disciplined, patient approach. Your hip joints can open quite easily if you remain consistent in your practice.

Energetically speaking, the hip joints are correlated with the powerful flow of prana in the pelvic region. These joints must be fully open to stimulate your life force. In my personal practice, opening my hip joints related directly to the awakening of energy deep in the center of my pelvis. While this is not verifiable by any scientific means, the deep external rotation that happens in the hips when I put my legs behind my head triggers a rush of energy along the *ida* and *pingala nadis* that has not been accessible to me through any other posture.

The intention of yoga's inner work is to awaken the sleeping energy at the root of the spine and then powerfully move it up the central axis (sushumna nadi). When your leg is behind your head, it presses down on your spine with the combined force of its weight and whatever muscular tightness is in your hip joint. If you collapse under this pressure, it can seriously injure your spine, such as herniating the disks. But if you find the strength to rise up from the center of your body and push back against your leg, it brings whatever energy might be awakened even further up your spine.

On a purely physical level, you can see how this principle works. Since your leg presses down and you press up to meet it, a resistance pressure is created. After the five breaths spent in each posture, you release the leg, and the energy created by the resistance pressure is free to flow and continue the forward and upward direction necessary to keep your leg behind your head. There are also energy points, like acupuncture points but known as *marma* points in the Indian tradition, behind the head and on the shoulders. The legbehind-the-head poses are meant to stimulate these points much like an acupressure massage.

On a fundamental level, having strong and flexible hip joints equates to health in yoga practice. Placing your legs behind your head demonstrates the deep external rotation that is necessary to complete this intense movement. If you lack the flexibility in your hip joints, it may also indicate that there is stuck energy—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—around that area of your body. The journey you take into the center of yourself to discover your hip joints will awaken new aspects of your consciousness. As you learn how to feel the rotation in your hip joints, your mind will expand to include new parts of yourself. It is not just the posture, but the full internal awareness and sensation you feel, that matters. Some people may have natural flexibility but limited internal awareness. Others may have lots of awareness but lack flexibility. Wherever you find yourself on the spectrum, one lesson is no better than another. The practice equalizes any imbalance within the body and mind.

EKA PADA SIRSASANA

Foot-behind-the-Head Pose

Drishti: Padangustha (Toes)

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump forward; wrap your right leg around your right arm, bending your right knee; thread your straight left leg through your arms; press firmly into your foundation through your shoulders; and activate your pelvic floor to catch and control the landing (see fig. 7.1).



Figure 7.1

Don't ignore jumping directly into the preparation for Eka Pada Sirsasana, as it demonstrates and teaches the combination of strength, flexibility, and coordination you need for the rest of the Intermediate Series. If you need to modify the movement at first, try jumping forward while placing your right big toe on the ground slightly ahead of your right hand and threading your left leg through your arms. Having a little extra support from your right toe may give you just enough grounding to figure out how to get through the movement. Bear in mind that while it is acceptable to jump up and have your hips high above your shoulders, it is not necessary or recommended when you are first learning this movement. Instead, keep your hips no higher than your shoulders and core strength. Staying closer to the ground will make the movement easier to control and remove any fear of falling.

If you are not able to do the movement at all, or if you manage to jump forward and wrap your right leg around but cannot control the landing, at least practice lifting up in the final position for one breath (see fig. 7.1) to build both neuromuscular memory and strength. While this landing point is normally used only as a transition, you may find it useful to hold this pose for a few extra breaths to work on developing strength. Exhale and sit down, placing both sit bones on the ground while keeping your right leg wrapped around your right arm. You are now ready to place your leg behind your head. Start off by bending your right knee out to the side so that your shin is parallel with your pubic bone and your knee points out to the right. Note that in the initial phase of the posture series the right hip is still in parallel position, indicated by the knee pointing back even though the thigh is wrapped around the upper arm. In order to move into the next step the hip joint will need to spiral into external rotation, indicated when the knee points out to the side. Align your right foot with your left shoulder. Bring both hands up under your right ankle, wrapping your palms around the front of the ankle and lacing your thumbs around the outer edge while keeping the palms together. Keep your back as straight as possible, reach out through the top of your head, and gaze toward your left toes. Now engage your pelvic floor, draw your lower ribs into your body, and support a gentle spinal flexion (see fig. 7.2).



Figure 7.2

At this stage of the posture, it is imperative that you relax your right hip joint as much as possible. Transfer the work of holding your leg up away from your leg and into your pelvic floor, back muscles, and arms. This relaxation is key to freeing up space deep within your pelvis to allow a full external rotation of your hip joint. Before any movement that requires flexibility, you have to create space and relaxation. Take the time now to find the openness within your hip joint. If you feel pain in your knee or are unable to do this movement, stay here and work on your hip joint. Hold this preparatory pose for as long as twenty breaths.

Until you can proceed further with this posture, do not attempt any more poses in the Intermediate Series. Instead, work as much as possible on the left side of Eka Pada Sirsasana, and then proceed to backbends.



Figure 7.3

If you are ready to continue, keep your back as straight as possible, aligned along the central axis of your body. Using the space you have created in your hip joint, gently align your right foot with the center of your face while pressing your right knee farther out to the right, creating a separation between your torso and your right thigh. Move your right knee even farther to the right while bringing your right foot toward your right ear (see fig. 7.3). Keep your back as straight as possible and allow the movement to come from your right hip joint. As you bring your foot toward your ear, allow your right shoulder to slide forward in an internal rotation around your right calf. This repositioning of the calf is crucial to healthy alignment while placing your legs behind your head. Keeping your lower belly sucked in and tucking your tailbone slightly

will help you find the support in your pelvic floor to go through this movement with the necessary strength.

If you are able to maintain this posture, you are ready to place your leg behind your head. Engage your core while keeping your spine straight, and slide your head slightly forward and down. With the strength of your arms, not your right leg, push your right foot behind your head. Let go of your ankle with your right hand (but keep holding it with the left) as it slides behind your head. Pull your right foot over to the left with your left hand, and use your right elbow to press your thigh back and away from your torso. Keep your knee pointing as much to the side as possible. Bend your left arm, firming your whole shoulder girdle, and hold the toes of your right foot with the fingertips of your left hand. Gently pull on your toes to slide your right shin to the left along your shoulders. Tilt your head down to make space for your leg to slide behind it. As soon as your leg is behind your head, reach your head up and actively press it into your leg to hold the leg in place. Transfer the work of your arms to your shoulder girdle, neck, and core. Place your hands in prayer position at the center of your sternum, and look toward the ceiling to enter the first stage of Eka Pada Sirsasana (see fig. 7.4).



Figure 7.4

Avoid pointing your right knee toward the back of your body. The direction of your knee will indicate the rotation of your hip joint. If your knee points behind you, it indicates that your hip joint is in parallel position, and if your knee points to the side, it means your hip is in external rotation. You need a deep external rotation to enter Eka Pada Sirsasana safely. If you fail to rotate your hip joint outward while attempting to place your leg behind your head, you may torque, tweak, or even injure your knee. Be cautious, patient, and diligent about externally rotating your hip joint to facilitate the movement into Eka Pada Sirsasana.

Avoid rounding your back too much to enter the posture, or you could compromise your spine. If you have a herniated disk in your spinal column, you can still work the external rotation of your hip joints and support your back with the bandhas. However, it is not recommended that you push too hard with deep spinal flexions. If it is rather severe, then do not attempt this posture. Also avoid collapsing your shoulder girdle.

Proceed further only after you have settled into the posture and checked your alignment and core strength. If your back, neck, and right knee feel comfortable, see if you can hold your leg behind your head entirely with the external rotation of your right hip joint and the strength of your core, back, and neck. Engage your right hip joint and right leg, draw your sit bones slightly toward each other, and actively bend your right knee and press it into your shoulders to help hold your leg behind your head.

If your leg starts to slide off your neck, try to hold the position by pressing back into the leg with your shoulders, neck, and core. Keep your lower ribs drawn in toward your center. If your leg stays behind your head when you use your hands or when someone helps you, but you are not strong enough to hold it there and your upper body collapses when you are on your own, try using your hands to press up on your chin for added support. Hold your head up for a few breaths and then attempt to hold the posture with your hands in prayer position again.

Although holding Eka Pada Sirsasana with your hands in prayer position is an advanced posture, it is only half the movement. Students new to placing their leg behind their head will find it beneficial to hold this pose for five to ten breaths before proceeding. Advanced students who are accustomed to the movement can attempt to place their leg behind their head in one fluid exhalation immediately after jumping forward and into the preparatory position. Advanced students may also try the most traditional method of entering Eka Pada Sirsasana, which is to hold this preparatory pose with hands in prayer position for only one breath before proceeding.

Progressing deeper into the external hip rotation and core strength requires folding forward along your left leg while holding your right leg behind your head. After settling into the preparatory pose, exhale as you fold your sternum toward your left knee, orienting your pubic bone along your central axis. Place your chin on your left shin, gaze toward your left toes, wrap your hands around your left foot, and grab your right wrist with your left hand (see fig. 7.5). This is the full expression of Eka Pada Sirsasana. Many students will find that their right leg falls off when they begin to fold forward. As you fold forward, keep your back as elongated as possible, reach your sternum toward your left knee, suck your lower belly in strongly, and actively press your shoulders, neck, and upper back into your right leg.



Figure 7.5

If this fails, try folding forward halfway so your elbows press into the floor, and use the floor to build a stronger foundation until you are ready to fold all the way forward. Do not relax your shoulders or neck while you are folding forward or once you are in the final position. Keep the posture activated to support your flexibility. If you cannot place your chin on your shin, try placing your forehead on your shin, and work toward reaching first your nose and then your chin forward over time. Keep your right leg actively engaged by pressing your right foot toward your left shoulder and engaging the muscles of the deep six hip rotator muscles to stabilize the external rotation. The deep six hip rotator muscles are the piriformis, gemellus superior, obturator internus, gemellus inferior, obturator externus, and quadratus femoris. They are called the deep six because they are buried deep in the gluteus maximus and are part of a group of muscles around the hip joint that control hip rotation. Stay here for at least five breaths.

Inhale as you return to sitting upright, placing your hands in prayer position. Use the strength of your shoulder girdle and neck to hold your leg behind your head as you inhale and return to the first iteration of Eka Pada Sirsasana (see fig. 7.4). Exhale to settle into the movement. If your leg slides off your neck during the transition back to sitting, use your hands to put it back in position. You can stay here for a few moments to settle before proceeding, if necessary.

If you are ready to transition out of Eka Pada Sirsasana, continue the exhalation by placing your hands on the ground so that your fingers point forward toward your left toes, your hands are slightly wider than shoulderwidth apart, your thumbs rest under your thighs, and the heels of your hands are aligned with the upper edges of your thighs, slightly forward of the hip creases. Inhale while pressing into your foundation with your shoulders, powerfully engaging your core, pulling the head of your left femur into its socket, tilting your head up, and lifting your whole body off the ground. Slide your shoulders and weight forward into your fingers and hands while rounding your back slightly. Press up with your shoulders and engage your core to lift up. Then bring your left toes toward the ceiling (see fig. 7.6). Keep your right knee bent and your right leg locked in place. Exhale as you release your right leg from behind your head, keep it locked around your right upper arm and return to the initial preparatory position (see fig. 7.1).



Figure 7.6

To begin the powerful movement that will take you back to Chaturanga Dandasana, bend both knees and align the toes of both feet directly behind your right hand. Bend your elbows while bringing your chest forward (see fig. 7.7). Take an additional breath here if necessary, but do not touch your toes to the ground. Exhale as you press into your foundation, engage your core, and straighten your legs while jumping back to Chaturanga Dandasana.

Advanced students will be able to flow through the movement from lifting up to jumping back in one fluid exhalation. Do not rush the process. If you are unable to go through the movement in one steady breath, take as many breaths as you need along the way. Do not attempt to "fake" the movement by touching your toes to the floor and hopping back. Instead, break the transition down into as many small, manageable parts as necessary for you to build up your strength. Eka Pada Sirsasana is as much about the strength and endurance it takes to stay with the posture for the full movement as it is about the flexibility to do the posture.



Figure 7.7

After you land in Chaturanga Dandasana, inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale and jump around toward the left side. Complete the same movement on the left all the way through to Adho Mukha Svanasana. You may notice that one hip is tighter than the other. This is completely normal, and you should stay for a few extra breaths on the tighter side to eventually create more balance in your body.

There is no modification for putting your leg behind your head in the Ashtanga method. The logic of the practice is that if you cannot put one leg behind your head, it will be increasingly hard to progress toward putting both legs behind your head in the postures that follow. If you cannot complete Eka Pada Sirsasana, stay here and work on the pose with patience and diligence until your hip joints open. Do not skip the posture and move ahead. When you meet an obstacle in the Ashtanga Yoga method, the practice asks you to respect that obstacle by giving it your full attention and being humble enough to listen to your body. Then, with the power of your breath, posture, and focal point, your body will open naturally.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the neck Engages key energy points along the shoulders, neck, and upper back Concentrates and strengthens the mind Relieves back pain Opens the hip joints for external rotation

DWI PADA SIRSASANA

Feet-behind-the-Head Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Putting both legs behind your head is one of the gateway postures of the Intermediate Series. The majority of people who quit the discipline of Ashtanga Yoga will do so at one of these gateway postures. Part of the reason Dwi Pada Sirsasana can be so frustrating is that there is no easy modification or gray zone for the attainment of the pose—you either put both legs behind your head or you don't. Some students may be stopped at Dwi Pada Sirsasana for years or perhaps even the remainder of their lives. I make this point, not to discourage you, but to put the difficulty of this asana into the proper perspective. The combination of external hip rotation, core strength, release through the lower back, upper body support, and physical endurance that Dwi Pada Sirsasana requires is not something to be undertaken lightly. This posture deserves your full respect and attention. It is not a party trick; it is a true teacher of some of the deepest yogic values, such as patience, nonattachment, courage, perseverance, and surrender. If you approach this pose from a purely physical perspective, it will not have the power to transform you. Your intention to allow the asana practice to transform the mind and spirit is paramount to the success of your yoga journey. Nowhere is this more evident than in the gateway postures.

When placing both legs behind your head, any compensation that may have allowed you to get into Eka Pada Sirsasana more easily will work against you. Since both legs must go behind your head, both hip joints must release equally into a deep external rotation, while both sides of your pelvis must press evenly into the floor. Both shoulders must press with equal force into the weight of your legs, and your neck must be twice as strong as it is in Eka Pada Sirsasana because your head is pressing against both legs instead of just one. The base of your hip joints, deep within your pelvis, is a reservoir of deep-seated emotional blockages. Opening your hips as deeply as you must in Dwi Pada Sirsasana demands that you cultivate a courageous heart. Not only does the posture itself excavate these sleeping demons within your pelvis, but the pure intensity of the pose often triggers a direct experience of some of the most powerful obstacles in your yoga practice, such as doubt, frustration, and anger. Even students who have natural flexibility will find Dwi Pada Sirsasana be challenging, since balancing with both legs behind the head and lifting off the ground requires great physical strength. You have the choice to frame your daily practice of Dwi Pada Sirsasana as a spiritual quest to the center of yourself. If you think of the journey of this posture in this way, it will transform you, even if both of your legs never get fully behind your head.



Figure 7.8

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump forward, wrap your thighs around the shelf of your upper arms, bend your knees, and reach your big toes toward each other without crossing your ankles (see fig. 7.8). Exhale as you sink your pelvis to the floor while keeping your left leg laced around

the shelf of your left upper arm, and allow your right leg to descend to the ground. Do not stretch your right leg out; keep it bent in a gentle external rotation, as this will help you feel the balance between your right and left sit bones that Dwi Pada Sirsasana demands. Inhale as you release the deep six hip rotator muscles on the left side and allow your hip joint to fall as effortlessly as possible into a deep external rotation. Hold your left foot with both hands, and place your leg behind your head in the same manner outlined for Eka Pada Sirsasana.

Note that you will be starting with the left leg in Dwi Pada Sirsasana. It is crucial that you transfer the work of holding your leg to your arms and relax your leg muscles so your hip joint has its full range of motion. Keep your core muscles firm throughout the pose. Instead of placing your hands in prayer position to help support your leg, as in the previous posture, your neck and shoulders will have to do all the work themselves. Once your left leg is situated comfortably behind your head, your shoulders are firm, your neck is pressing back into your left shin and you are looking up, you are ready to place your right leg behind your head. At this point, your left-side deep six hip rotator muscles should become active to help keep your left leg behind your head. Actively bend your left knee and reach your left toes as far toward your right shoulder as possible. Be careful not to extend your knees; keep them bent to keep your body locked in the asana. Once your head locks your left leg in position, do not tilt it forward or your legs will slide off your neck.



Figure 7.9

Allow your pelvis to take on a slight posterior tilt. This subtle movement will give your sacrum space to widen and your lower back the ability to release and elongate. Do not try to straighten your spine; keep it slightly flexed and support the movement with the core of your body. Place your left hand on the floor slightly in front of your hips, keeping your left elbow bent firmly under your left knee and your left shoulder pressing back against your left leg. Keep looking up. Do not lower your head or attempt to hold your left leg behind your head with your left arm. If you cannot keep your left leg locked in place without the added support of your hands, your hips might not be open enough for you to attempt Dwi Pada Sirsasana.



Figure 7.10

If you are ready and able to proceed, roll your right shoulder forward into a slight internal rotation, point your right knee out to the side, and clasp your right ankle from underneath with your right hand. Press backward and upward on your right ankle while rolling your right elbow forward toward the center of your body (see fig. 7.9). Do not change your head position while doing this movement. Press far enough back on your right ankle to create the space for your right calf to slide forward around your right shoulder. If the calf does not clear your shoulder, you will not be able to get deeply into Dwi Pada Sirsasana, so be sure to take the time to settle into this movement before proceeding.



Figure 7.11

Once your right leg slides behind your shoulder, allow your toes to touch toward the back of your head, angled slightly to the right (see fig. 7.10). Do not attempt to do all the work of the posture with your right hand. As soon as your toes begin to touch, activate your feet and toes, release your right hand, and let your feet do the work of the pose. Hook your feet around each other, flexing them to get them into place. Bend your knees, place both hands on the floor, and squeeze down with your legs (see fig. 7.11). Think about engaging your ankles as you do when entering Bhujapidasana from the Primary Series. Engage all your deep six hip rotator muscles while bending your right knee to hook your right leg around the outside of the left. This is the first step to getting deeply into Dwi Pada Sirsasana. Only if you are able to maintain this posture with your feet interlocked should you proceed to the complete expression of the pose with your toes pointed.

If you are comfortably situated, then spread your feet apart, point your toes with your ankles and shins crossed, and actively bend your knees to keep your legs behind your head. Next, press your hands together in prayer position, aligning your thumbs with the center of your sternum; press your shoulders and neck back into your calves and look up (see fig. 7.12). Hold for five breaths. If you attempt to point your feet too quickly, your legs will slide off your neck, and you will fall out of the posture. Use the flexing of your feet to

build a firm foundation before pointing your toes. If you cannot point your toes while keeping your legs behind the head, you can also try to bring your hands into prayer position while keeping your feet interlocked. Eventually, you will be able to point your toes while maintaining the integrity of Dwi Pada Sirsasana.



Figure 7.12



Figure 7.13

Whether your feet are pointed or flexed, your knees remain powerfully bent and your shoulders press strongly back into your calves while your gaze is upward. Some students find the balance point difficult. To create stability in your pelvis, engage the bandhas and allow your pelvic bowl to tilt gently under in a posterior direction. Place your weight evenly between the right and left sides of your pelvis. Do not attempt to balance on your sacrum or your back will be too rounded. Find the balance point between your sit bones and tailbone, much as in Navasana from the Primary Series. Keep lifting your spine to allow as much space and support as possible between your vertebrae.

There is a danger of injuring your spine if your core does not provide adequate support for your back, so proceed with caution. Do not try the posture against a wall if you cannot balance, because you will not be developing the necessary core strength to support the pose. Instead, seek the assistance of a teacher or merely try it three to five times every day while slowly developing the required strength and flexibility. Be patient.



Figure 7.14

Proceeding on to the next stage of Dwi Pada Sirsasana, place your hands on the ground slightly in front of your pelvis, either shoulder-width or slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. Allow your elbows to bend at the beginning. Lean your weight forward into your hands while engaging your core and slowly straighten your arms and pressing up with your shoulders. Avoid allowing your collarbones to collapse inward; press back with your neck and shoulder girdle into your legs. Gaze upward, supporting the dristhi with a firm activation from your shoulders and neck muscles. Inhale as you lift your body off the ground, maintaining the Dwi Pada Sirsasana position (see fig. 7.13). As you bend your knees as strongly as possible to maintain the posture, your upper body must press with equal strength back into your legs. This action and counteraction make the posture more difficult but also deeper and easier to hold.



Figure 7.15

Many students find the second portion of this posture harder than the first because of the dynamic strength required to hold the legs in place while lifting off the floor. If your feet start to slide apart and you are about to come out of the posture, try locking your flexed feet again once you are lifted to stabilize the leg-behind-the-head position. Then slowly point your toes when you feel more steady. Work toward keeping your feet pointed throughout the whole movement. Stay in this position for at least five breaths.



Figure 7.16

Exhale as you release your feet, unhook your legs, and balance in Tittibhasana (see fig. 7.14). Continuing the same exhalation, lift your hips and point your toes toward the floor (see fig. 7.15). Then bend both of your knees simultaneously and take your legs back to Bakasana (see fig. 7.16). Some students will have a hard time bringing both legs back at the same time directly from Tittibhasana. If you do, bring one leg back at a time by leaning over to the side (see fig. 7.17). If you choose this method, hold Bakasana once your legs are bent backward, even if Bakasana looks more like Kakasana.

Do not hold Bakasana for any longer than is necessary to feel your foundation. As soon as you feel stable, immediately jump back in the same manner described for Bakasana A and B. Exhale as your legs float back directly to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and move into Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.



Figure 7.17

Jumping back from Dwi Pada Sirsasana is nearly the same transition you learned in the Primary Series poses Bujapidasana and Supta Kurmasana. It is slightly harder to jump back from Dwi Pada Sirsasana because it demands greater muscular endurance.

If you cannot keep both legs behind your head while gazing upward or cannot jump back from the posture, do not proceed further. Allow your strength and flexibility to build slowly and perhaps place more emphasis on strength and external rotation of your hips throughout your whole practice. Do not rush through or ignore the lessons of Dwi Pada Sirsasana. Practice with patience and diligence, and release any desire for the outcome to arrive in any particular form or time frame.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the neck Engages key energy points along the shoulders, neck, and upper back Concentrates and strengthens the mind Relieves back pain Opens the hip joints for external rotation

YOGANIDRASANA

Yogi's Sleep Pose

Drishti: Broomadhya (Third Eye center)

Since Yoganidrasana is approached from a reclining position, you may find it easier than Dwi Pada Sirsasana. Nevertheless, you should not change the order of the postures. Nor should you use Yoganidrasana as a preparatory stretch for the previous posture. Instead, treat them as distinct lessons that build on the same principles from different angles. Use these two postures as complementary but do not proceed to Yoganidrasana until you have integrated the strength and flexibility needed for Dwi Pada Sirsasana. If you skip the lesson contained in the previous posture, you will not develop the core strength needed to support the increased flexibility of your hip joints and your lower back, and you may predispose yourself to injury in Yoganidrasana. Take the time to learn each pose properly before proceeding to let the deep spiritual work of the practice integrate with your body and mind.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through, straighten your legs, and lie down to prepare for the pose. There are two ways to enter Yoganidrasana, one easier and one deeper, both of which are valid.



Figure 7.18

Beginning with the easier version, bend your knees, flex your feet, turn the soles of your feet toward the ceiling, and hold on to the outside edges of your feet. Some yoga practices call this Happy Baby Pose, but it is not named in the Ashtanga Yoga tradition, as it is merely a preparation for one version of Yoganidrasana (see fig. 7.18). Next, lift your sacrum off the ground, rotate both hip joints outward, point your knees out to the side, and bring the soles of your feet toward your face (see fig. 7.19). Roll both shoulders forward, drop your neck slightly, slide your hands down to your ankles, and exhale as your place both feet behind your head, crossing with the left foot first and the right foot behind. Once your feet are crossed, flex them to go a little deeper, press your neck back into your left ankle or shin, and bind your hands or fingers around your lower back or sacrum. Finally, spread your feet, point your toes, and gaze toward your third eye center (see fig. 7.20).



Figure 7.19

This method of getting into the posture requires easy external rotation of the hip joints, open shoulders, a strong neck, and a fluid understanding of how to get into the pose. In addition to its ease, the benefits of this method include the fluid progression toward placing the legs behind the head in one or two breaths and the approachability of the posture from this perspective. The disadvantages include the inability to go very deeply into the pose; the intensive rounding of the lower back, which may compromise support of the spine; and the fast nature of the movement, which may create injury. This method is contraindicated for anyone whose hips are relatively tight or for anyone seeking to get deeper into the pose.



Figure 7.20

The second method of getting into Yoganidrasana starts off in the same reclining position but works with one leg at a time rather than both. This technique will allow your body to go deeper and your spine to be straighter and therefore more supported by your muscles. Begin in the supine position and externally rotate your left hip joint while gently bending your right knee, placing the sole of your right foot on the floor for support. Using both hands on your left ankle, bring your left foot as close to your forehead as possible while turning your left knee out to the side. Think of this as a reclining version of Eka Pada Sirsasana, and apply the same cautions and tips given for that pose.



Figure 7.21

Lift your body slightly off the ground, roll your left shoulder forward, bend your neck forward, and thread your neck around your left shin to place your leg behind your head. Once your leg is behind your head, release your left hand and pull your left foot over with your right hand to bring your left thigh as close to your torso as possible. Once your leg is where it should be, press your left shoulder and neck back into the shin to lock it in place (see fig. 7.21). Avoid using your hands to hold your leg in place. The flexibility and strength to hold your leg behind your head should be fully established after the correct practice of Eka Pada Sirsasana and Dwi Pada Sirsasana.



Figure 7.22

Next, lift your right leg off the ground, rotate your right hip joint outward, point your right knee to the side, and bring your right foot as close to your left shoulder as possible (see fig. 7.22). Roll your right shoulder slightly forward, lift your body just enough to allow the space for your right foot, touch your toes together as in Dwi Pada Sirsasana, and allow your feet to do the work of the posture, flexing to bring your legs fully behind your head.



Figure 7.23

At this stage of getting into the posture, it is crucial to make space for your right shoulder to slide around your right calf. If your right calf does not move back, then your legs will seem stuck in place. To go deeper into the pose, reach back and hold your left foot with your right hand and your right foot with your left hand, and pull to spread your feet as far apart as possible. To lift your chest over your calves, you may find it useful to stretch your arms over your head to create space and length in your spine and shoulders (see fig. 7.23). Finally, reach your hands around your lower back and neck (see fig. 7.20). See if you can reach the back of your head toward the floor between the opening of your feet. This method is the one that I most regularly recommend for devoted practitioners who seek to move deeply into their bodies and practice.

After entering Yoganidrasana as far as you can using either method, engage your core muscles to elongate your spine as much as possible. Press your shoulders back into your calves while lifting your chest. Suck in your belly and allow your spine to be supported both by the earth beneath you and your pelvic floor inside.

Yoganidrasana is literally translated as Yogi's Sleep Pose, but do not attempt to actually sleep in this position! Find the ease and comfort of rest and relaxation amidst the appropriate amount of the work needed to maintain the structural integrity of the posture. Think of your legs as the "pillow" and your body as the mattress in this asana.

Yoganidra is also a practice outlined in traditional Hatha Yoga texts as a meditative state that keeps the mind balanced just between wakefulness and sleep. In this supraconscious state, subtle sense perception is heightened and the mind naturally flows inward. The meditative mind is meant to awaken the possibility of pratyahara, or the fifth limb of the Ashtanga Yoga method, which turns the faculty of the sense organs toward direct perception of the inner body. While it is not advisable to practice yoganidra during Yoganidrasana, you will cultivate the inner state of wakefulness more strongly during this posture. In all asanas, it is good to have a fluid, holistic awareness of the subtle flow of energy throughout your body.

Since Yoganidrasana is attempted from a reclining position, you may feel pressure on your intervertebral disks if you work on a thin mat. Try this posture on a thick mat, or place a towel under your body prior to attempting this posture. If you feel pain in your spine that is not alleviated by the use of a thick mat or towel, back off from the pose.

The flexibility and strength you need to enter Yoganidrasana should be fully established from the previous two postures, so if you have opened your body with the proper Ashtanga Yoga methodology, you should be able to proceed easily through Yoganidrasana. Thus, this is not considered a gateway posture, but an integration posture where the alignment, openness, and energy of the previous asanas are both deepened and expressed.

After five breaths, exhale as you release your hands, drop your neck forward, and unlock your feet. Inhale again as you roll backward through Chakrasana (Wheel Pose; see fig. 7.24). Pivot your body in a circular motion around the axis of your shoulder joints. Use your core strength to lift your body over your neck. The movement of Chakrasana should be well established from your regular practice of the Primary Series. (For a more thorough explanation of Chakrasana, consult *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga.*) Exhale and bend your elbows into Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.


Figure 7.24

BENEFITS

Calms the mind Engages key energy points along the shoulders, neck, and upper back Relieves back pain Opens the hip joints for external rotation

TITTIBHASANA A, B, C, and D

Firefly Pose A, B, C, and D

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Students who have followed the traditional method of Ashtanga Yoga and mastered each of the previous poses in the Primary and Intermediate Series should not have any major flexibility issues with Tittibhasana. The integrated practice of Kurmasana, Supta Kurmasana, Dwi Pada Sirsasana, and Yoganidrasana should give your body all the abilities you will need to enter Tittibhasana. The real challenge presented in the Ashtanga Yoga method of this pose is based on strength and endurance. Only after your foundation of flexibility is fully established does the practice ask you to test your limits by combining strength and flexibility in active and dynamic postures.

Whereas most of the previous postures in the Primary and Intermediate Series have only one or two segments, Tittibhasana is a complicated network of movements that flow through at least five different stages, traditionally done with no break in between. Even the most agile and fit practitioners will find the muscles that support the posture, such as the quadriceps, fatigued by the end of the full series of Tittibhasana variations. No matter how often I do this asana in my daily practice, I am always challenged when I join a guided Intermediate Series class. My quadriceps, lower back, and shoulders are always burning by the end of the posture, so do not be surprised if you feel something similar the first few times you integrate Tittibhasana into your practice.

Since this pose demands so much aptitude in terms of strength, do not proceed to Tittibhasana until you have established your foundation of flexibility through mastery of the previous postures. If you do, you will build strength that may inhibit your flexibility. Respect the logic of the practice, and if you do not have the required flexibility, be diligent and humble while allowing your body to open gently over time. If you jump into this posture without the necessary flexibility in your hips, lower back, and shoulders, you may also risk injury when the muscles that support your body get fatigued. Be patient and add the posture to your practice only when your body (and perhaps your teacher) tells you that you are ready.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump your feet as far forward in front of your hands as possible. Keep your wrists planted firmly on the ground as you jump, and avoid lifting the heels of your hands off the ground. Stack your thighs onto your shoulders, come up onto your toes, straighten your legs, press into your foundation, engage your core, and inhale as you shift your weight into your hands and lift your body off the ground to enter Tittibhasana A (see fig. 7.25). Avoid spreading your legs too far apart or allowing your thighs to slide down your arms. Hold this posture for five long, steady breaths while gazing at your nose.



Figure 7.25

Agile, strong students will be able to jump into this posture directly from Adho Mukha Svanasana. Do not try this on your first attempt; wait until you are familiar with the pose, have been practicing it regularly, and are looking for a new challenge.

To jump into Tittibhasana, inhale as you send your hips forward over the foundation of your arms. Come to balance with legs spread slightly apart and your torso aligned with your shoulders (see fig. 7.26). Exhale as you slowly send your shoulders forward, flex your spine, engage your core, lower your hips, and slide your thighs around your shoulders to lower into Tittibhasana. This transition is not easy and requires a dynamic mix of strength and flexibility, but with practice, it will certainly come.



Figure 7.26

Maintaining Tittibhasana A, press your shoulders back into your calves while squeezing your thighs toward your shoulders. Draw your tailbone under and suck your lower belly in deep to facilitate a slight spinal flexion. Keep your core firmly engaged. Allow a gentle inward rotation of your thighs while engaging your quadriceps to fully straighten your legs. Squeeze your thighs toward your shoulders to keep them as high on your arms as possible. Broaden your collarbones while keeping your chest open and supported. Do not allow the weight of your body to collapse inward toward your sternum. If you feel a pain at the center of your chest at the sternoclavicular joint, be very conscious about engaging your shoulder girdle; if the pain gets too intense, back off from the posture until you get strong enough to support your body.



Figure 7.27

While some versions of Tittibhasana A show the hips and feet lifted in alignment with the shoulders, the Ashtanga Yoga version suggests keeping your hips lower and your feet lifted and angled above your head. Be conscious of the Ashtanga Yoga alignment when entering Tittibhasana A, and use the power of your pelvic floor to support and lift your body. After five breaths, exhale as you place your feet back on the floor by bending your knees. Do not lift your shoulders out from behind your thighs. Even if your thighs are burning, just stay in the posture and surrender to the strengthening process. After one month of regular practice, you will be stronger.

Once both feet are on the ground, take a moment to slide your torso between your thighs and move your shoulders behind your calves. If necessary, you can move your legs into position one at a time. Lift one heel up, press the calf muscle forward around the shoulder, and settle the heel back down once you are deeper (see fig. 7.27). Repeat on the other side to position yourself properly.

Next, wrap your arms around your thighs and lower back while internally rotating your shoulders. Press your shoulders into your calves as you round your back. Reach your hands toward each other at the level of your sacrum or your lower back, threading your fingers together or grabbing your wrist to bind your hands. Straighten your legs, align your heels with the outer edges of your yoga mat, bring your chest as far through your thighs as possible, and look toward your navel to enter full Tittibhasana B (see fig. 7.28). Suck your belly in as far as possible and support your body from your core. Stay in this position for five breaths.



Figure 7.28

Tittibhasana C is a test of endurance. Keeping your fingers or hands bound behind your back, look down at your mat between your feet. Inhale and walk your right foot forward, then exhale and walk your left foot forward (see figs. 7.29 and 7.30). Repeat four more times so you take a total of ten steps forward. Inhale and walk your right foot backward, then exhale and walk your left foot backward. Repeat four more times so you take a total of ten steps and end up back at your original starting point. Do not lift your hips or feet too high. Walk as normally as possible and use at least the full length of your yoga mat, going off the mat if necessary for you to take full steps. Your thighs should be burning the first few times you attempt this movement. This completes Tittibhasana C.



Figure 7.29



Figure 7.30

Next, bring your feet as close together as possible, keeping your heels slightly apart and your feet as close to parallel as possible. Release your hands but do not remove your shoulders from behind your thighs. Interlace your fingers in front of your ankles, allow your head and neck to release down toward the floor, and straighten your legs as much as possible to enter Tittibhasana D (see fig. 7.31). As you stay in the posture for five breaths, move your heels away from each other and inch your toes closer together. Straighten your legs, release your neck, and keep your fingers interlaced. If it is impossible for your feet to be anywhere close to parallel for Tittibhasana D, then align your heels and point your feet out to the side to make it slightly easier. Hold the deepest version of Tittibhasana D you can for five full breaths. While maintaining the pose, rotate your thighs inward, squeeze your legs toward your torso, press your shoulders into the backs of your legs, and allow your weight to distribute equally in the soles of both feet.

Tittibhasana D is the pinnacle of the posture. Keep your mind steady and calm, and do not panic. There is little risk of injury, but the deep muscular work will challenge your notions of strength.

Finally, release your fingers, bend your elbows, and place your hands on the floor behind your feet. Allow your knees to bend slightly as your head comes up. Press into your arms, engage your shoulder girdle, firm your pelvic floor, tighten your quadriceps, and lean your center of gravity forward as you inhale and lift off the ground into Tittibhasana A once more (see fig. 7.25). Rotate your thighs inward, point your toes, and reach your feet away from your body while simultaneously pulling the heads of your femurs into their sockets to stabilize your pelvic floor. Sometimes it is advisable to hold this pose for a few breaths to find more balance and settle into the movement or to work on stamina and endurance. However, if you are well established in the posture, it is not necessary. After entering Tittibhasana A, exhale as you bring your legs back to Bakasana (see fig. 7.16). Do not hold Bakasana, just use it as a transition and jump back in the same manner as described for Bakasana A and B and Dwi Pada Sirsasana. Exhale as your legs float back directly to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and move forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.



Figure 7.31

Tittibhasana both concludes and challenges this section of the Intermediate Series, where the deep external rotation of the hip joints brings energy up the spine supported equally by strength and flexibility. Tittibhasana asks your hips to be open and strong, demonstrating the dynamic control that the last section of the Intermediate Series demands of your body. As in all yoga practice, the balance between strength and flexibility is established as a state of mind that is then expressed physically. Throughout your practice, maintain a calm mind that is dispassionately focused on the present experience of your asana. In this way, you will be focused inward and form no attachment to the outcome of your efforts.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the wrists Engages the thighs Builds mental strength Builds physical stamina and endurance

Be Strong: Dynamic Control of the Shoulders and Spine

STRENGTH IS SOMETHING THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN CHALLENGING for me, and I work on it every time I practice. One of the things I love about the Ashtanga Yoga method is that it constantly challenges me to be stronger and to find strength where I am naturally weak. Whenever I reach a plateau, there is always a new posture or a way to look at an existing posture to bring greater awareness of strength. Traditional yoga philosophy defines the practice of asana as a balance between strength and grace or between steadiness and comfort. Whenever you work on strength, focusing on core strength rather than just upper body strength is a way to integrate the physical body with the subtle body and to find that perfect balance in asana practice.

Whereas your body has to demonstrate mastery of spinal extension in backbends and spinal flexion for leg-behind-the-head poses, the lesson of the strength poses of the Intermediate Series is about dynamic control over your entire spine. In essence, the practice asks your body to perform spinal extension and flexion at your command. Your shoulders are the firm basis for this movement. More than just physical or brute strength, this portion of the Intermediate Series is where you manifest the lessons learned from controlling your neurological responses to stress. By maintaining the strength of your shoulders while moving powerfully through spinal extension and flexion, you are asked to demonstrate equanimity in the face of tumultuous change.

Many naturally stronger or stiffer students who have put in intensive inner work to release their backbends and hips will find a pleasant change of pace in this segment. However, many students who found the previous two segments that focus on flexibility easier will find their true challenge here. It is not just about building muscle and hunkering down, but about embodying the perfect balance between activation and release. The Ashtanga Yoga method asks you to tap into a strength that is simultaneously open and compassionate to yourself and others.

The yoga journey is never just about the external result. Even postures that seem physically challenging are meant to provide a strong, steady mind as well as a strong body. The dynamic strength poses of the Intermediate Series are essential for developing this steady mind and strong body. You will be challenged to find a peaceful place inside yourself while attempting these asanas. When you experience that place within your body and mind, that is the essence of yoga. Rather than merely staying comfortable, yoga asks you to challenge your boundaries and limitations so that one day you will experience the limitless nature of your inner self. Use these postures not just to build a strong body, but to build a strong mind and steady emotional balance.

My own biggest lesson in yoga, and perhaps in life, has been strength. I was not naturally strong when I started, but after fifteen years of practice, I definitely feel much stronger. Yoga is about finding your limit and using it as a mirror. Through yoga I discovered my tendency to quit, collapse, and give up physically and emotionally when things get difficult. When the world just seems to be too much to bear, I have a strong desire to crawl into a cave inside myself and break apart. I have spent days, months, and sometimes years digging myself out of my own emotional black holes. The lesson I have learned is never quit, never give up, no matter what happens or how intense the situation is. Strength in yoga has given me the strength to find meaning in suffering, the strength to become the hero of my own life story, and the strength to find hope in the ashes of my own disillusionment. The discovery of your own inner strength is the true power of Ashtanga Yoga.

PINCHAMAYURASANA

Forearm Balance / Feathered Peacock Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Ashtanga Yoga is first and foremost a spiritual practice. It is not an exercise where you judge your success by how hard you work your body or how perfect each posture is. You cannot measure a good yoga class by how many adjustments you get or how much attention the teacher gives you. Yet in the beginning, it is nearly essential to have a teacher guide you into the postures, and when you really need help, the teacher should ideally be there to provide it.

But some students get too attached to having help in asanas when they would benefit more from trying several times on their own. For example, I recently heard R. Sharath Jois tell his assistants in Mysore to let certain students work on challenging arm balances or backbends for a while on their own before going to help them. His actual words were "let him suffer" or "let her fall." This refers directly to the value of pain and suffering within the context of the yoga practice and points toward the greatest potential for growth and development in the student.

When you learn a new posture, you often need the teacher to help you go to places inside your body and mind that bring up fear and pain. But after a while, you need to strengthen your nervous system and face these places with your own inner resolution. Sometimes asking the teacher to help you every day is a kind of escape that prevents you from experiencing exactly what you would need to experience to learn the tough lessons contained within some of the most difficult poses.

For example, in a posture like Pinchamayurasana, you need to learn how to fall freely and safely to get over the fear of it. If you always go to the wall or ask a teacher to spot you, then you will never develop the kind of self-confidence it takes to master the pose on your own. You have to learn to let yourself fall.

When I first learned Pinchamayurasana, I fell over and over. One day I fell more than twenty times. I was impatient but determined. Then, after eighteen months of trying and falling, the balance came and stayed. Yes, you read that correctly, it took me a full year and a half of trying every day to learn how to balance in this pose. While I was learning, I used the wall once a week to train for endurance, and I mostly practiced on my own so I never even had the chance to have someone catch me. When I went to the wall, I stayed for twenty-five breaths to build strength. When I toppled over, I picked myself right back up and tried again. My back was always more flexible than it was strong, so for me to learn how to balance in this posture, I had to learn to be strong enough to control my spine. Pinchamayurasana was a lesson in patience (I am not a naturally patient person), perseverance (I wanted to quit nearly every day), and ultimately in self-confidence (I had to learn to believe in the idea of my own strength). Every pose has its own time and its own lesson for each person. The key is to be willing to put in the work whenever you face a moment of difficulty, pain, or suffering.

You have to let yourself fall; you have to learn how to fall safely; and most important, you need to find the strength to get back up and try again, no matter how long it takes. If you do your practice from the perspective of avoiding the uncomfortable feeling of falling, then you will deprive yourself of the full scope of learning that yoga provides. If you can learn how to face pain and suffering, then you will understand what the practice is all about. Learning how to fall is about understanding what suffering is, how to face it, accept it, and eventually make it your friend. This is at the core of yoga's deepest teaching.



Figure 8.1

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you place your elbows on the floor, shoulder-width apart, and walk your feet in toward your hands (see fig.

8.1) to prepare. If you can move directly into position without placing your knees on the ground, you will build more strength and endurance. However, if the posture is new and challenging, come to your knees from Adho Mukha Svanasana to set up for Pinchamayurasana. Align your wrists and hands with your elbows. If your elbows slide apart, start off with your elbows slightly closer together than shoulder-width so that if the skin of your forearms slides outward, your elbows will lock into place when they are shoulder-width apart. Firm your shoulder girdle by powerfully engaging your deltoids and initiating an eccentric contraction (in which the muscles elongate while under tension) deep within the rotator cuff muscles. Firm your latissimus dorsi muscles and activate your pelvic floor. Keep your gaze at a single spot on the mat between your forearms, slightly toward your thumbs. The smaller the spot, the better your mind will be at concentrating on it. Walk your feet in toward your elbows as far as possible while keeping your upper arms perpendicular to the floor. Do not collapse forward or bring your face close to the ground while walking your feet in.

This is the perfect preparation for Pinchamayurasana. Holding this position will build the muscular strength your need for the posture. If you find this preparatory position difficult, hold it for five to ten breaths before attempting the full pose.

Having established a solid foundation through the structural integrity of your shoulder girdle and a firm activation of your pelvic floor, you are ready to lift up into Pinchamayurasana. There are at least three different ways to enter this posture. I will introduce the easiest and most approachable version first, then present the other two in order of increasing difficulty.



Figure 8.2

From the preparatory position, lift your left leg straight up while transferring as much weight forward into your shoulders as possible; come onto your right toes (see fig. 8.2). Note that you can lift either the right or the left leg according to your preference, but if you attempt Pinchamayurasana with one leg at a time, you should switch legs regularly to create evenness in your shoulders and pelvis. Begin to allow a slight forward bend in your elbows to take the weight of your body farther forward, but do not collapse. Keep your deltoids firm and your shoulders engaged. Reach upward actively with your left leg as you point your toes and keep all the muscles of that leg fully engaged. Allow your left leg to reach far back, past the plane of your shoulders and center line, while keeping your shoulders and core firm. It is okay if your back arches slightly as long as your core is engaged to support your spine. Inhale as you pivot your hips forward until the toes of your right foot naturally come off the ground.



Figure 8.3

If you cannot pivot forward and lift up by leaning forward, try bending your right knee a little and lightly jumping forward to help transfer your weight. Do not jump too hard. Instead, float your body as lightly as possible and use only the minimum amount of power needed to push your body forward. If you jump too hard, you will overpower your balance and your shoulders and fall too far forward. While it is not dangerous to fall, it can be avoided by simply jumping with the appropriate amount of force. If you are afraid of falling, do not jump very high; simply jump a few inches off the ground, allowing the right foot to "catch a little air" and then land again, to get used to the experience of balancing on your arms.

The next step is crucial to your mastery of Pinchamayurasana, so be conscientious about it as you practice. Balance with your legs in an open scissor before you attempt the full posture (see fig. 8.3). Only when your mind is calm and you body is controlled should you attempt to close your legs. Do not rush to bring your legs together, or you will fall backward and not find your balance. Once your legs are balanced in an open scissor position, slowly press into the foundation of your shoulders, engage your core, tuck your tailbone, suck in your lower belly, draw your rib cage in toward your center line, and gently firm your thighs as you bring your legs together in alignment with your torso to enter full Pinchamayurasana (see fig. 8.4).

Balance your body by stacking your legs on top of your pelvis, your pelvis on top of your shoulders, and align your whole body in one clean line. Do not overarch your back, collapse into your shoulders, or dump weight down into the lower back and compress your lumbar vertebrae. Lift upward as powerfully as possible while keeping your body aligned along its central axis.

Once you master lifting or jumping up with one leg at a time, you are ready to try lifting or jumping up with both legs at the same time. Start off in the same preparatory position as before (see fig. 8.1). Bend both knees into your chest while pressing firmly into your foundation and engaging your core. Pull your lower ribs strongly in toward your center line. Lean your shoulders slightly forward to no more than a forty-five-degree angle, while sending your pelvis forward and squeezing your knees into your chest. Allow your feet to lift off the ground naturally in reaction to the weight shift. Once your hips are aligned over your shoulders, press your elbows back to ninety degrees and slowly straighten both legs. If you cannot lift both legs at the same time, you can jump from the preparatory position, following the same directions as for jumping with one leg. Once you master lifting up with both legs bent, you are ready to try lifting up with both legs straight.



Figure 8.4

Start off in the preparatory position. Firm your shoulder girdle and engage your core while sending your hips over your shoulders. Allow your shoulders to pivot forward no more than forty-five degrees. If your head touches the floor, you have gone too far. Instead of bending your knees into your chest, simply send your hips so far forward that your legs follow that direction and your body lifts off the ground (see fig. 8.5). Once your legs are parallel to the floor, press your elbows back to ninety degrees and straighten your legs. Lift your body as powerfully as possible while firming your shoulders, pelvic floor, and legs.

After you maintain the full balance for at least five breaths, you are ready to jump back from Pinchamayurasana. Sometimes it can be daunting to attempt this movement directly from the pose. When performed correctly, it looks like a gymnastics-style dismount. Instead of trying to do this "dismount" the first time you do the posture, come down from Pinchamayurasana on an exhalation in the same manner that you entered it, either with your feet together or in scissor position. Keep your arms in the same position so your forearms remain on the ground. Walk your legs back into Chaturanga Dandasana while keeping your body somewhat parallel to the floor (see fig. 8.6). Exhale, bend your elbows, and lean slightly forward. Press the floor away as you inhale and lift your hands totally off the ground. Allow yourself to lose control a little, then exhale and "fall" into Chaturanga Dandasana. Since you are only an inch or two off the ground, even if you hit your stomach or chin, you won't do any real damage. This modification allows you to learn the basics of the movement, and you will build strength and selfconfidence so that one day you can jump back from the full posture. Repeat this movement from the modified plank and drop into Chaturanga Dandasana three times.

Once you can balance steadily in Pinchamayurasana and jump back using this modification three times daily, you are ready to try jumping back from the full posture. You will need one crucial element: faith. If your body has all the physical abilities to perform a movement, the only thing remaining is for you to put the pieces together in your practice. Sometimes people who are the strongest and have the most control have the hardest time with this jump back, because it requires letting go of control on the way down. You have to fall back down and trust that you will catch yourself in the landing.



Figure 8.5

When you are ready to try jumping back from the full posture, start in Pinchamayurasana and bend your elbows to bring your face slightly toward the ground. Allow your back to arch slightly and take your weight in your shoulders and core. Exhale and press into the floor. Inhale, fall backward, and quickly change your hands as you are falling, and exhale again while landing in Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward over your toes to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back over your toes to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Remember not to rush into trying the full jump back movement from Pinchamayurasana. Be sure you have all the physical components fully established before you make the attempt.



Figure 8.6

Many students like to use the wall to help them find the balance in Pinchamayurasana, but I recommend learning how to fall instead. If you use the wall to support your body for any strength poses, then it is best to use the support of the wall to only to build strength or endurance, but not when you're trying to learn balance. If you absolutely must use the wall for this pose, do so only once a week and hold Pinchamayurasana for twenty-five to fifty breaths. To truly learn the posture, it is better to learn how to fall, because in falling, you learn real balance. Falling out of Pinchamayurasana is most easily done in a backbend position. If you feel your body going too far forward and your back arching and you cannot stop this momentum by pressing into your fingertips or strengthening your pelvic floor, then simply allow your back to arch and land on your feet in a backbend. Get up and calmly try again without blaming or getting frustrated with yourself.

Attempt the posture no more than five times per day to set a clear mental boundary; beyond this, more effort is not useful. Once you get comfortable falling, you will be well on your way to mastering Pinchamayurasana. If you never learn how to fall, you will always fear the posture or falling. Commit yourself to the journey of yoga through the vehicle of Pinchamayurasana. No matter how many times you fall, pick yourself up and try again that day or the next. One day you will find your balance.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the shoulders, arms, back, and core

Builds mental and physical endurance

Encourages emotional balance

Stimulates the pituitary gland

KARANDAVASANA

Mighty Duck Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

To say that this movement is one of the most challenging in all the Ashtanga Yoga series is not an understatement. Some students have been driven to quit Ashtanga Yoga by their frustration with this posture. After fifteen years of experience, I am familiar with both how to teach this movement and how to practice it successfully. Karandavasana is an epic test of strength, flexibility, and mental endurance. It is the gateway posture that demonstrates dynamic control of the nervous system and mastery over the emotional body. You will need all of the flexibility you gained in your hips through Eka Pada Sirsasana and Dwi Pada Sirsasana, as well as the openness in your shoulders gained from Kapotasana and the calm, steady strength of Pinchamayurasana, to master this pose. But perhaps more than anything else, you will need psychological endurance both during your daily practice of the posture and during the long and arduous journey that it may take to master it. In a group of one hundred students practicing the Intermediate Series, it is not uncommon to see only one or two students who can complete Karandavasana properly without assistance.

You are ready to practice Karandavasana only when you can balance in and jump back from Pinchamayurasana. Do not attempt this posture before that, or you will not have the strength to perform it regularly. You will risk either injury or such severe mental frustration that adding it to your practice will not be beneficial to your yoga journey.



Figure 8.7

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you place your elbows on the ground in alignment with your wrists and shoulders in the same preparatory posture as for Pinchamayurasana (see fig. 8.1). Inhale, lift or jump up into Pinchamayurasana, and maintain the balance (see fig. 8.4). Exhale and fold your legs into Padmasana position while holding your posture steady (see fig. 8.7). Lower your legs onto your forearms, aligning your shins with your armpits (see fig. 8.8). Stay for five breaths. Inhale lift back up to Pinchamayurasana while maintaining the Padmasana position (see fig. 8.7). Release your legs from Padmasana and stay balanced in Pinchamayurasana (see fig. 8.4). Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the same manner as outlined for Pinchamayurasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale, jump your feet forward between your arms, and look up as in the sapta position of Surya Namaskara A (see fig. 8.9). Exhale and fold forward as in the astau position of Surya Namaskara A (see fig. 8.10). Inhale and come directly into Samsthiti, leaving your arms by your sides as you return to standing.



Figure 8.8

If only it were that easy! Now that you have the basic outline of the posture, let's break down the movement step by step so you will be able to understand and practice all the different components and one day master them. The first challenge of Karandavasana is to fold your legs into Padmasana (Full Lotus Pose) without using your hands or losing your balance in Pinchamayurasana. This requires a unique combination of flexibility in your hips, spatial orientation through the back of your body, and strength in your shoulders and core. If your balance is still shaky in Pinchamayurasana, you may want to try this first movement from the safety of Sirsasana, but you will eventually need to be brave and try it from your forearms.

From a good balance in Pinchamayurasana, allow your legs to fall into an open scissor with your right leg toward the front of your body and your left leg toward the back. Allow a slight spinal extension, and do not try to tuck your tailbone too much. Support your body with your core muscles and the stability of your shoulder girdle. Open your legs as wide as possible to create the space for your feet to fold into Padmasana. Allow your right hip joint to rotate outward gently as you bend your right knee. Point the top of your right foot is in place, lift your right knee as strongly as possible toward the ceiling. Use your core muscles to maintain your balance.



Figure 8.9



Figure 8.10

Next allow your left hip joint to rotate outward as your left knee bends. Align your left foot with the back of your right thigh. Slowly move your right thigh backward while keeping your right foot as closely aligned with your left hip crease as possible. Slide or wiggle your left foot over your right shin, and aim your left foot toward your right hip crease. If your left foot gets stuck while you're trying to cross it over your right shin, use your feet and wiggle your toes to literally walk the foot over the shin. Once you have both feet in place, point both of your knees up, allow a slight spinal extension to support the weight distribution in Padmasana, and maintain your balance with the power of your pelvic floor (see fig. 8.7).

Before you try to lower into the full posture, be sure that you are able to maintain your balance in Pinchamayurasana with full Padmasana. Only when this preparatory movement is stable are you ready to move on. A good place to practice taking the Padmasana position without the help of your hands is in Urdhva Padmasana (Flying Lotus Pose; see fig. 8.12) from the closing postures, as this is repeated as part of daily practice regardless of which Ashtanga Yoga series you are working on.



Figure 8.11

Holding the balance steady with Padmasana in Pinchamayurasana, begin preparing for the long and scary descent onto your arms. Tighten your Padmasana position by squeezing your feet into your hip creases and engaging your feet. Bend at the waist while sending your hips back until your thighs are parallel to the floor (see fig. 8.13). If you do not send your hips far enough back to compensate for the weight shift in the movement, you will fall. Clear out the interior space of your pelvis by sucking your lower belly in deeply toward your spine. Fold your thighs onto your torso and rib cage to lower even more (see fig. 8.14). To come down correctly, it may be necessary to take additional breaths, so let yourself breathe as needed throughout this movement until you master the technique. Once your thighs are folded onto your rib cage, begin drawing your lower ribs in and activating your abdominal muscles. Firm your rotator cuff muscles, and keep your deltoids strongly engaged. Do not allow your face to touch the floor as you go down.

It is useful to think about this downward motion as a deep inward spiral of your entire body. Squeeze your whole body into a tight, round package while leaning your shoulders slightly forward, and align your knees and shins with your armpits to lower down into Karandavasana (see fig. 8.8). Keep your pelvis lifted and engaged throughout this process by drawing your iliac crests toward your rib cage and your pubic bone toward your sternum while engaging your abdominal muscles. Avoid landing with too much force or without control, as this will make the full posture even more difficult.



Figure 8.12

Never give up the feeling of liftedness through your hips and support through your shoulders. While you are in the full pose, increase the level of activation of your core muscles, shoulders, and hips. Do not rest, but allow your mind to remain simultaneously soft and strong. Prepare yourself mentally for the full movement. Stay in Karandavasana for at least five breaths to build strength and stabilize your balance.

Students who are unable to complete the full posture should either wait for assistance from their teacher or repeat the posture between three and fives times a day until they can fully move through the sequence. When you are on the precipice of completing the full movement by coming back up into Pinchamayurasana, you may be able to control the movement better if you stay down for one, two, or three breaths instead of five. This is an acceptable modification while you are learning the complete posture.



Figure 8.13

Going down is the easiest part of Karandavasana. Coming back up is the hardest. The key to understanding this motion is that it is half strength and half technique. Some people with the muscular power to do the movement cannot because they are applying the wrong technique. Others who lack the muscular strength can compensate for this with correct technique. There is a step-by-step method for coming back up from Karandavasana that yields proven results when followed diligently. Most important, do not rush or attempt to do the pose without the prescribed technique. Surrender to the journey on which the technique takes you, and one day you will most definitely master the full movement.



Figure 8.14

When you are ready to come back up, either on your own or with assistance, begin by leaning your weight forward slightly into your shoulders. Do not collapse your shoulders forward, and do this motion as slowly as possible. Once you feel your weight shift, press into the ground with your entire shoulder girdle, including the deltoid, latissimus dorsi, and rotator cuff muscles. Tighten your abdominal muscles and pull your knees into your chest. Don't worry if your body feels stuck; try anyway. Focus on the technique, not the result. Tune in to your hips and your pelvic floor, and send your hips up and forward over the solid foundation of your shoulders while pressing your feet into your hip creases as firmly as possible. Once your knees start to lift off your arms, you have to be diligent and patient. Keep squeezing your knees into your chest; do not release them outward or you will fall and not come back up. Keep sending your hips forward, squeezing your knees into your chest, and pressing into the ground with your shoulders until your hips reach the ninety-degree mark that indicates you are halfway up (see fig. 8.13). Then lift your knees up to the ceiling and balance in Padmasana (see fig. 8.7). Stay here until you feel the balance. Do not immediately release Padmasana. After you have established your balance, slowly release your legs, return to Pinchamayurasana, and prepare to jump back to complete the vinyasa as described earlier.



Figure 8.15

Many students will find the movement of coming back up nearly impossible. There are a few ways to work on the technique and strength for this movement. The first and perhaps easiest way to build strength is to stay in Karandavasana for between twenty and thirty breaths at least once every day that you practice the Intermediate Series. Holding the pose for that long builds the mental and physical endurance needed to complete the movement. Even if you cannot lower into the full posture from Pinchamayurasana, you can still get the benefit of holding the full posture for this extended period of time. In fact, if you cannot go down smoothly, then holding the posture will help you build the muscular strength you need to do so.



Figure 8.16

The easy way to get into Karandavasana if you cannot land properly is to try from a seated position. Start by taking Padmasana and coming forward on your knees. Next, place your forearms on the ground in the same alignment as for Pinchamayurasana, except this time also align your elbows with your shins (see fig. 8.15). Extend your shoulders, engage your core, suck your lower ribs in toward your center, and lean forward until your shins start to slide up your upper arms toward your armpits to enter full Karandavasana (see fig. 8.8). Do not collapse your shoulders or plant your forehead on the floor. If both of your legs do not slide up at the same time, trying walking one leg at a time. Lean a little to each side to give yourself space to walk your Padmasana up your triceps one by one (see fig. 8.16). Aim your shins as close to your armpits as possible. Hold this posture for between twenty and thirty breaths, then simply allow your hips to fall back to the ground, where there should be ample padding to make a soft landing.

Understand that this technique is merely a tool to help build the strength you need for the posture, and it should in no way be substituted for the full posture. Try to use the traditional entry and exit to the posture first, then use use the modified approach on your second attempt to build strength and stamina.



Figure 8.17

When learning Karandavasana, it is beneficial to be creative in your approach. One tool that is especially helpful in learning the movement through your spine, back, core, and shoulders is attempting the full posture from Sirsasana (see fig. 8.17). As mentioned previously, this pose is a safer place to go through the movements without the risk of falling or the stress of balancing on your forearms.

From Sirsasana, fold your legs into Padmasana according to the method outlined earlier (see fig. 8.18). Once you have established Padmasana, lower your legs as for Karandavasana. You will most likely reach a point where you feel you cannot go down any farther and that going lower feels like crossing a dangerous abyss. Use the safety of Sirsasana to explore this place. Finally, lower your legs in Padmasana all the way to the backs of your triceps, aiming your shins toward your armpits by spiraling your whole body into a tight little ball (see fig. 8.19). Hold for a few breaths, then thrust into your elbows, send your hips forward, and uncurl your body in the same manner already outlined. If you manage to do this entire movement, you have the correct neuromuscular patterning to succeed at Karandavasana, and the next step is to apply this same principle to the full posture.



Figure 8.18

Progress through Karandavasana is slow and steady and comes in many stages. When you can lower your legs and hold the pose successfully, you are really only halfway to the full achievement of the posture. Do not move on from Karandavasana until you can regularly go down and hold the posture for at least five breaths every day. Students with natural strength should stay at Karandavasana until they master both lowering and coming back up. If you are not successful in this movement, stop here and proceed immediately to backbends.



Figure 8.19

If coming up seems impossible after going down, then try breaking the posture up into two parts. First lift up into Pinchamayurasana, take Padmasana, and lower into the full posture for five breaths. Then allow yourself to fall backward onto the floor and rest for five to ten breaths. Next, lift up from the ground in the manner outlined for the endurance-building exercise. Do not hold this for too long; come back up after one or two breaths.

The other approach to training for the full pose is to use a hybrid of Karandavasana and Sirsasana. For this method, lift up into Pinchamayurasana, take Padmasana, and lower into the full posture for five breaths. Then lean forward while pressing your elbows and firming your shoulder girdle. Allow your forehead to touch the ground and use this added support to lift your hips up and forward just as you did from Sirsasana, keeping your legs in Padmasana tightened the entire time. Once you have lifted all the way back up and your body is aligned along its center line, press your shoulders firmly into the ground while reaching upward with your core strength to lift your head back off the ground, and return your arms to the lifted Pinchamayurasana position. Do not release Padmasana until you have lifted your head off the floor and found the balance there, or you might fall too far forward or collapse your foundation.
Each of these intermediary steps to Karandavasana builds muscular strength and mental endurance. As you gain more confidence in yourself and in your body's ability to do the movement, you will have the necessary faith to put all the pieces together and finally complete Karandavasana. Be aware of your shoulder position throughout the movement. If the corners of your shoulders ever feel as though they are going to collapse forward, place your forehead on the ground for support or come out of the posture. Never do unnecessary damage to your body while building strength.

In the traditional method of the Intermediate Series, Karandavasana is the point where it is best to stop practicing the Primary Series prior to the Intermediate, as explained in the Introduction. Once you are regularly practicing the Intermediate Series up to Karandavasana, you have reached a major milestone in the Ashtanga Yoga method. Take a moment and congratulate yourself, because not many people successfully practice this far. Acknowledge yourself for the hard work and dedication that you have put into your yoga journey.

BENEFITS

Strengthens the shoulders, arms, back, and core

Builds mental and physical endurance

Encourages emotional balance

Stimulates the pituitary gland Demonstrates dynamic control of the spine and nervous system Helps relieve the symptoms of depression

MAYURASANA

Peacock Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

The peacock is native to southern Asia, and the beautiful plumes of the male bird appear in Indian epics, temple artwork, and folk traditions. The Hindu deity Krishna is sometimes depicted with a peacock feather, while other deities take credit for blessing the peacock with its tail of a "thousand eyes." *Mayura* literally means "peacock" in Sanskrit, and a derivation of the word is said to mean "killer of snakes." In reality, the birds are omnivorous and eat a wide variety of items, including fruit, seeds, grains, small mammals, and reptiles. They are renowned for eating and digesting otherwise toxic material, including poisonous snakes and human excrement.

Mayurasana appears in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* written by Swami Svatmarama. It is described in detail, with careful direction for the student to "place the palms of both the hands on the ground and place the navel on both the elbows and balancing thus, the body should be stretched backward like a stick" (*Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 1:32–33). Svatmarama further states that Mayurasana "soon destroys all diseases, and removes abdominal disorders and all those arising from irregularities of phlegm, bile and wind, digests unwholesome food taken in excess and increases appetite and destroys the most deadly poison."

One of the stated benefits of regular practice of Mayurasana is the ability to eat poisonous materials and remain unharmed. It could be postulated that the poison referred to in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* includes both the litany of physical toxins and impurities that may enter the digestive tract as well as the "poison of conditioned existence" (*halahala*) referred to in the traditional Ashtanga Yoga opening prayer. If taken literally, then, practicing Mayurasana confers a certain immunity to the poisons that would otherwise create physical and spiritual sickness. The peacock itself sometimes symbolizes wisdom, and it is wisdom that is the true antidote to the poison of conditioned existence and offers liberation. At the very least, Mayurasana is understood to aid in the power of digestion of physical, emotional, and mental substances.



Figure 8.20

When I first attempted Mayurasana years ago, I felt like a soggy banana with no hope of ever lifting up. I watched powerful yoga practitioners—who were mostly men—lift up effortlessly into this posture. When I tried, I felt my stomach collapsing around my elbows. The feeling of my weight pressing onto my elbows only made it harder for me to find any strength or stability in this posture. My elbows slid apart and failed to find a firm position in the center of my navel. If I did manage to lift off the ground, the position of my body failed to resemble a firm stick. Over time, I realized that I had fundamentally misunderstood the posture and hindered my practice even further than my natural disposition toward weakness did.



Figure 8.21

Looking at a photo of Mayurasana, it is tempting to think of the pose as similar to Shalabhasana (Locust Pose), but Mayurasana is absolutely not a backbend. It is a powerful core strength posture that extends the legs back from this foundation. If you attempt to extend your spine to lift your legs, your abdominal muscles will elongate and the posture will collapse in on itself. When working on Mayurasana, the foundation of the posture is in the core strength of your body. You need your abdominal muscles to be firm and pulled in so that when you press your weight onto your elbows, the muscles of your torso support your body. If your weight dumps down to the sensitive inner portion of your body, you will not have any power in this posture. Furthermore, if your elbows actually press through your stomach and reach your spine, you will feel uncomfortable and not be able to remain in the pose. One common mistake is to think that your legs will lift in a spinal extension. If you bend your back too much, you risk losing the connection to your core.



Figure 8.22

Having established the right mind-set for understanding Mayurasana, you are ready to proceed with the posture. Starting off in Samsthiti, inhale and fold forward from your hips, while taking your feet hip-width apart. In the same movement and breath, place your hands on the ground between your feet, aligning your little fingers and the outer edges of your hands together. Look up and lift the center of your sternum forward (see fig. 8.20). Exhale and fold your head between your arms while keeping your elbows as straight as possible and your hands locked in the same position (see fig. 8.21). Inhale, look up again, slide your head back through your arms, and keep your wrists flat on the ground as in the starting position. Exhale and jump your legs back to approximately the same distance as in Chaturanga Dandasana while keeping your forearms vertical (see fig. 8.22). Inhale as you bend your elbows into your navel, engage your shoulder girdle, thrust into the floor with your arms, firm your abdominal muscles and pelvic floor, reach your chest forward, and lean your weight even farther forward into your hands to come into full Mayurasana (see fig. 8.23). Stay here for at least five breaths.



Figure 8.23



Figure 8.24

Inhale and place your feet on the ground, toes pointed, and lift your chest to extend your spine, coming into a modified version of Urdhva Mukha Svanasana with your wrists in the same position as in Mayurasana (see fig. 8.24). Exhale, roll over your toes, bring your head through your arms while keeping your elbows as straight as possible, and come into a modified version of Adho Mukha Svanasana with your wrists in the same position as in Mayurasana (see fig. 8.25). Inhale, roll your head through your arms again, jump your feet around the outsides of your hands, and lift your chest to look

up. Exhale, fold forward, and slide your head through your arms. Inhale, lift your head back through your arms, release your hands from the floor, and return to Samsthiti.



Figure 8.25

Mayurasana is a complex posture that involves a careful articulation of the lower spine on the platform of firm abdominal muscles. To succeed at this asana, your wrists need to be both strong and flexible. You need at least a full ninety-degree extension in your wrist. If this is challenging or strained, the posture will be very difficult for you. Mayurasana is also strongly contraindicated for anyone with wrist injuries.

One small modification that can help in the beginning is to allow a little space between your hands so that only the tips of your little fingers are touching, rather than the entire length of your hands. This extra space decreases the amount of wrist extension needed for the posture and gives a little more room for experimentation. If you attempt this modification, be conscious about drawing your elbows together as you lean forward. If there is any space between your elbows, they will start to separate as you attempt to lift up into Mayurasana. A common way to fall out of the posture is when the elbows slide apart, so be sure not to start off in a position that encourages this. It is usually harmless, but still generally not advised, to fall in this manner.

Sometimes wearing a shirt or placing a towel under your elbows can prevent them from slipping apart. When placing your elbows on your abdomen, be very conscious about the exact point of contact with your body. Some people attempt to place their elbows as low as possible to target the center of gravity in their pelvis. However, this posture is best done when the elbows are aligned with the solar plexus, between the rib cage, right about at the navel.

Once, when I was practicing the Intermediate Series in Mysore under Guruji's guidance, he corrected the placement of my elbows. At first he just said, "Your Mayurasana is wrong," frowning and grunting before walking away. I went after class to ask for more in-depth guidance, at which point Guruji leaned forward, made his hand into a fist, and very nearly punched me in the solar plexus. He then said with a very big smile, "You take it your elbows there, otherwise the posture no use." Two amazing things happened in that moment: first, all the muscles around my solar plexus engaged, and second, I have never forgotten exactly where my elbows should go in Mayurasana.

To place your elbows in your solar plexus and get the full benefit of the posture, you need to have strong abdominal muscles. Do not try to lengthen the front of your body or extend your spine. Instead, fully engage your core and allow all the layers of your abdominal muscles to participate in that engagement. Use your transverse abdominals and your internal obliques. Draw your lower ribs toward each other to activate your serratus anterior muscles. If you press your elbows into a soft space in your abdomen, you will press uncomfortably on your organs and spine and ultimately fail to create a solid foundation for the pose.

Once you have firmed your abdomen properly, an easy way to come up into Mayurasana is to place your elbows in your solar plexus and then lean forward until your chin is on the ground. Then engage your legs and pull your kneecaps into your pelvic floor to tip your weight forward. As your chest and chin touch the ground, they provide a counterbalance to the weight of your legs lifting in the back, making the entry into Mayurasana a little easier. Once your legs are engaged and supported by your core strength, thrust into your arms and allow your chest to raise off the ground. Never stop pressing into the ground with your shoulders while in Mayurasana.



Figure 8.26

If you cannot lift into the posture, avoid jumping your legs in the air. Stay in the preparatory position for five to ten breaths while firming your abdominal muscles (see fig. 8.22). Lift one leg for five to ten breaths, then switch legs for another five to ten breaths. If you do not have a teacher to help you in the posture, try placing both of your feet on a block to give yourself a little leverage and encourage the feeling of the posture. Drawing your weight in toward your center may be easier to control so another way to experiment with Mayurasana is to enter the posture with bent knees rather than straight legs (see fig. 8.26). By drawing your weight in toward your center of gravity, you will keep your weight more concentrated. If you succeed at lifting your body off the ground with bent knees, then straighten your legs from there to fully enter the posture.

If you still find the posture impossible, it may be useful to do some targeted core strengthening exercises to help build the firm core you will need for Mayurasana. Starting in Navasana (see fig. 8.27), exhale as you roll your sacrum onto the floor and lower your feet. Draw your elbows together, placing them in your solar plexus, and stay for five breaths (see fig. 8.28). Inhale and return to Navasana. Repeat three to five times. Think of this as a "floating Mayurasana," and do this movement as extra credit outside the flow of your Ashtanga Yoga practice if you find it useful or necessary. Do not replace Mayurasana with this core strengthener.



Figure 8.27

Mayurasana is an intense posture that demands your full respect. Do not move on from it until you have fully integrated its lesson. If you have wrist, elbow, or shoulder issues or injuries, use caution when attempting this pose. That being said, the strengthening process that Mayurasana provides for your wrists may actually be therapeutic for repetitive stress injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome if you move into the posture slowly, with careful alignment and technique. Be careful about stabilizing your sternoclavicular joints (where your collarbones meet your sternum), because too much forward pressure on these joints may lead to injury.



Figure 8.28

Students who have severe health issues involving organ function, such as heart disease or intestinal problems, should proceed with the utmost care and

consult their doctor for advice before proceeding. Menstruating and pregnant women should avoid Mayurasana. Do not underestimate the powerful, detoxifying effect of this posture.

BENEFITS

Improves digestion and elimination Detoxifies the blood and organs, especially the liver Revitalizes the stomach, pancreas, and spleen Helps relieve mild symptoms of diabetes Calms the mind

Increases concentration

Purifies toxins and impurities of the physical and spiritual bodies

NAKRASANA

Crocodile Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Chaturanga Dandasana is one of the hardest foundational poses in the Ashtanga Yoga series. Students spend years developing the strength to keep their shoulder girdle and torso aligned in this posture. When I first started practicing, I was happy whenever I did not plant my chin on the ground in every Chaturanga Dandasana! Later, when I saw the powerful movement called Nakrasana, I never imagined it would be part of my practice. But like anything else in the Ashtanga Yoga method, you have to try that which you believe is impossible and challenge your notion of who you know yourself to be.

Nakrasana takes its name from the crocodile, and the jumping, lurching movement of the posture seeks to imitate the pouncing movement of that reptile landing on its prey. Obviously, having a stable, strong, and wellaligned Chaturanga Dandasana is a necessary prerequisite to Nakrasana. At this point in the Intermediate Series, all students who have followed the traditional method should have the strength to hold Chaturanga Dandasana well. If you find that you do not have this foundational strength, look back at the Primary Series of Ashtanga Yoga and see where you may have rushed through some of the lessons, perhaps glossing over the work of jumping back and jumping through.

Once you are ready to proceed, start in Samsthiti. Inhale and raise your hands over your head, pressing your palms together and rolling your elbows toward each other. Exhale and fold forward, placing your hands on the outsides of your feet, palms flat on the ground, and your head touching your shins. Inhale and lift your head, looking up while keeping your hands on the ground. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Scoot your feet together so your heels are close together (see fig. 8.29). Inhale and jump this version of Chaturanga Dandasana forward as far as possible, up to one foot from your initial starting point (see fig. 8.30). Keep your feet together even as you jump. Exhale as you land. Repeat four more times for a total of five times.



Figure 8.29



Figure 8.30

Ideally, you will travel the entire length of your body during the five jumps forward so that your feet end where your hands started. Next, jump backward from this version of Chaturanga Dandasana as far as possible, up to one foot from your starting point. Repeat four more times. Make sure you return to your original starting point. After the last jump, settle into Chaturanga Dandasana for a moment. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale and jump your feet forward between your hands while looking up. Exhale and fold forward over your thighs. Inhale, stand up, and return directly to Samsthiti, but do not raise your arms over your head.



Figure 8.31

When I first attempted to jump forward in Chaturanga Dandasana, nothing happened. I pressed into the ground and engaged my core, but I was glued in place. I tried bouncing to generate momentum with little success. The only thing that worked was to modify the posture entirely. So if your inner crocodile is slow to pounce on its prey, try this easy technique. Start in Kumbhakasana (Plank Pose). Keep your arms straight. Inhale as you press down through your arms, firm your pelvic floor, and lift your hips forward with the power of your core strength (see fig. 8.31). Do your best to jump your feet and hands at the same time. Once you land a few inches forward of your initial starting point, exhale and lower into Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale, straighten your arms, and return to Kumbhakasana. Do all ten jumps in this manner, integrating ten push-ups into your practice.

Once this gets easy, you can progress toward the full posture. Some people find that they can jump forward but not backward. Feel welcome to do a hybrid version of the pose in which you do the full Nakrasana jump forward and the modified Kumbhakasana jump backward. Over time, you will build the strength you need to master this movement. As long as you remain committed to doing this strength-building routine as part of your daily practice, it is safe to move on from Nakrasana once you feel that it does not sap too much of your life force. Nakrasana is a test of strength and endurance. At this point in the Intermediate Series, your body and mind are challenged and perhaps pushed right to the edge. The energy required to succeed in Nakrasana charges your body and mind and builds self-confidence.

The most important technical point to consider is that the movement comes from an integrated activation of your pelvic floor and abdominal muscles that is supported by the strength and stability of your shoulder girdle. Do not kick your legs or jump your hands and feet separately. Integrate the movements into one continuous flow. Press down firmly with your arms while sending your hips up and forward. Keep your legs firmly engaged, and let your whole body lift powerfully up and forward. While it may be fun to think about jumping very high and "flying," the purpose of Nakrasana is to jump forward, not up. Think about traveling as far forward as possible and let the upward motion happen on its own. If you jump too high, you may place undue stress on your wrists and shoulders when you land.

The strong activation needed from your lower back through your abdominal region stimulates the samana prana vayu, which ignites the digestive fire and creates balance in the body and mind. The process of jumping sends a rush of rising air through your body. This rising air is associated with uddana prana vayu, which helps cultivate spiritual consciousness. Symbolically, the action of jumping forward is associated with levitation and defying gravity, even if only for a millisecond. By connecting to the subtle flow of energy always present in your body, you make your body light and have the feeling of floating in Nakrasana. This lightness represents the inner light of a body that glows from within.

BENEFITS

Improves digestion and elimination

Helps lower back pain Helps relieve mild symptoms of depression Increases mental and physical endurance Creates the feeling of lightness in the physical body Encourages emotional balance

VATAYANASANA

Horse Face Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

The hardest thing about Vatayanasana is the complex entry into and exit from the posture. Taken without this carefully coordinated movement, the pose itself is less challenging. It has been postulated that the complete version of Vatayanasana resembles a horse face, hence giving it its name. The horse as a symbol in classic yoga philosophy is often tied to the chariot and the power associated with the charioteer. The Katha Upanishad, which includes one of the first introductions of the term yoga as a method of spiritual practice, presents the chariot as an allegorical image in which the self is the passenger, the body is the chariot, pure consciousness is the charioteer, the mind's thought forms are the horse's reins, the five senses are the horses, and the objects perceived are the path followed. Also aligned with raw power, solar fire, nobility, and rapid movement, possession of the horse itself indicates a certain level of mastery. A ritual sacrifice involving a horse, called the ashvamedha, appears in both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These sacrificial rituals stemming from the Vedas form the basis of the inner rites of purification performed during the Ashtanga Yoga method. Yoga signifies a turn away from external rituals toward introspective personal practices that seek to cultivate inner realization.



Figure 8.32

From Samsthiti, inhale, fold your right leg into a half-lotus position, and bind your right foot with your right hand (see fig. 8.32). This is the same preparation as Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana (Bound Lotus Forward Fold Pose) from the Primary Series. By this point in the Intermediate Series, your hips should be open enough to perform this stage of the asana without modification. If you are not able to fold forward while maintaining an easy half-lotus you may have jumped ahead too quickly from the foundational work of the Primary Series. When learning this posture, there is no modification. Simply do the work of the posture and learn the movement patiently over time.

Only students who have previously attained proficiency in Vatayanasana and are rehabilitating from an injury that prevents them from entering the pose should consider modifications here. Any such modifications would be given by a qualified teacher based on the individual student's needs during recovery.

When performing Vatayanasana traditionally, your right leg will not exit the half-lotus position until it is time to switch sides and place your left leg into half-lotus position. All the following movements will be performed with your right leg held in half-lotus. Exhale and fold forward, placing both hands on the floor next to your left foot so your right hand is aligned with the inner edge and your left hand is aligned with the outer edge (see fig. 8.33). Inhale and look up as you keep your hands on the floor (see fig. 8.34). Bend your left knee and jump your weight lightly into your arms. Although your weight is in your arms, be careful not to jump up to a handstand or extend your legs upward. Exhale as you land on the ball of your left foot and then carefully bend your elbows and lower down into a special Chaturanga Dandasana. Proficient students will be able to jump back and land directly into the special Chaturanga Dandasana in one continuous flow in the same manner practiced for the Sun Salutations. Exhale and jump back to a special Chaturanga Dandasana (see figs. 8.35 and 8.36). Keep your arms and torso in the same position as in all previous versions of Chaturanga Dandasana. Engage your left leg, firm your pelvic floor, and lift your right knee off the ground while maintaining the half-lotus leg position. Inhale, and roll over your left toes without placing your left knee or your hips on the ground to come to a special Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.37). Keep your right knee off the ground. Exhale and roll over your left toes without placing your left knee or your hips on the ground to come to a special Adho Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.38). When rolling over your toes in this transition, support your body from your core and strengthen your shoulders to avoid "sickling" (flipping the ankle outward so that the foot looks like a sickle) your foot or rolling outward with your ankle. From here you are ready to enter the first side of Vatayanasana.

Inhale as you jump forward toward your hands, landing on your left foot. Externally rotate your left hip joint, and turn your left foot outward. Plant your left heel firmly on the ground and do not allow it to lift. Align your left knee with your left foot so both are pointing in the same direction and stacked on top of each other. Ideally, your left hip is open enough to allow a full external rotation of ninety degrees out to the left, but if not, simply turn your left foot as far as possible without damaging your knee. Once you have established the deepest external rotation of your left hip, sink through your hip joints to allow your right knee to reach toward the ground. While maintaining the half-lotus leg position, spiral your right thigh inward. Align your left heel with your right knee so your left heel sits directly in front of your right knee.



Figure 8.33



Figure 8.34



Figure 8.35



Figure 8.36



Figure 8.37



Figure 8.38

You will feel two different directions working your hips. This action is the essence of the grounding of Vatayanasana. Press through the kneecap of your right leg into the ground to create a foundation in your right leg. Engage your pelvic floor firmly and begin to lift your torso forward to start to lift into the posture (see fig. 8.39).



Figure 8.39

If you have a hard time balancing or grounding your left heel, take your left hand to your left hip to walk up the framework of your body and help ground your left heel. Once you feel your legs stabilizing, lift your chest forward to stand partially upright. Thread your arms around each other, aligning your elbows then sliding your right elbow on top of your left bicep, spiraling your forearms around each other and flattening your palms against each other. Your fingers will not be in alignment; the fingers of your left hand will reach to about the middle of your right hand. Keep your thumbs oriented toward the center of your face to be sure your palms are pointing in the right direction. Finally, press your palms strongly into each other and lift your hands simultaneously up and forward to create even more length and lift in the posture (see fig. 8.40).



Figure 8.40



Figure 8.41

While it may be tempting to lift higher, you should lift only as high as your foundation allows. The strength of the posture comes from your connection down into the earth. Keep your hips grounded and be sure not to hike them back to enter the pose. If lifting your arms creates a disconnection with the earth under your feet, allow your arms to lower a little. The gentle threading

of your arms creates balance in your shoulder girdle, helping to release any overexertion created by the previous postures.

Anyone whose shoulders have a tendency to dislocate or move out of alignment will benefit from performing Vatayanasana with careful emphasis on shoulder stability and alignment. For people with tighter shoulders, this asana offers the chance to lengthen the rotator cuff muscles. Since your hips are actively reaching in two different directions, one spiraling inward while the other rotates outward, the muscles along your lower back and sacroiliac joints are both stretched and strengthened. There will be a mild twisting sensation along the outer edge of the left side of your pelvis (the leg that is externally rotated). Be careful not to jam your sacroiliac joints by falling down into your pelvis. Use the strength of your pelvic floor to lift up as powerfully as possible. Keep your torso aligned along your central axis and avoid leaning to one side to lift higher.

After five breaths, exhale and take your hands to the floor around your left foot. Inhale, straighten your left leg, and lift or jump off the ground (see fig. 8.35). Exhale, jump back, and land in the same special Chaturanga Dandasana as before (see fig. 8.36). Inhale and roll over your left toes to the special Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.37), then exhale and roll over your left toes to the special Adho Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.38). Release your right foot and return to normal Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Inhale as you take your left foot into a half-lotus position. Begin by allowing your left hip joint to rotate outward. Then point your left foot toward your right hip joint, wiggling and rolling side to side to slide your foot toward the right hip crease. Once your foot has reached its maximum place of contact, transfer your weight onto your left hand, and use your right hand to pull your left foot fully into half-lotus position.

Take the time to set up properly, or the posture will be very difficult. Just as in any lotus position, the top of your foot is aligned with the opposite hip crease. Once your left foot is settled into half-lotus position, inhale and jump forward toward your hands, landing on your right foot. Perform Vatayanasana on the opposite side according to the directions already given (see fig. 8.41). After five breaths, exhale and take your hands to the floor on either side of your right foot. Inhale, straighten your right leg, and lift or jump off the ground. Exhale, jump back, and land in the same special Chaturanga Dandasana as before, this time with your left knee off the ground (see fig. 8.42). Inhale and roll over your right toes to the special Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.43), then exhale and roll over your right toes to the special Adho Mukha Svanasana (see fig. 8.44). Inhale, jump forward, and land on your right foot (see fig. 8.45). In the same inhalation and movement, bind your left foot behind your back with your left hand. Exhale and fold forward into Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana on the left side. Inhale and look up. Exhale as you settle into the posture and firm your pelvic floor. Finally, inhale, stand all the way up, release your left foot from the bind, and return to Samsthiti.



Figure 8.42



Figure 8.43



Figure 8.44


Figure 8.45

BENEFITS

Relieves pain and stiffness around the sacroiliac joints

Reduces lower back pain

Aligns the shoulders Helps relieve mild symptoms of arthritis Equalizes the hips and pelvis

Calms and steadies the mind

PARIGHASANA

Gate Pose

Drishti: Urdhva (Up to the sky)

Once you have made it this far in the Intermediate Series, you can congratulate yourself on nearly completing the journey. While the remaining postures are still challenging, if you have succeeded at everything up until this point, they will not be too hard for you. The test will be centered around developing the physical and mental endurance it takes to stay through the end of the Intermediate Series. You will also get a chance to integrate the lessons learned through your diligent practice of this series. But if you skipped ahead or glossed over the basic strength and flexibility lessons from the preceding postures, then you may feel stressed by the addition of this series of shoulder, hip, and strength asanas.

The logic of the Ashtanga Yoga method is not meant to punish you or hold you back from fun things unnecessarily. It is a systematic retraining of the body and mind. If foundational principles are not in place, the system requires you to build your foundation, much as you would stabilize the foundation of a building before adding any additional floors.

Parighasana is translated as the Gate Posture, with the notion being that the body resembles the shape of an iron bar placed on the outside of a gate to keep it locked or unlocked (*parigha* means "iron bar or beam"). Yet perhaps metaphorically, Parighasana is another type of gate, because it represents the passage through all the great lessons of the Intermediate Series. Once you pass through this pose, you can consider that the marathon journey through the Intermediate Series is turning toward its last leg. You have already passed through all of the great gateway postures that are the major roadblocks of this series. Your nervous system has been retrained to be stronger, more flexible, and ultimately more balanced. While the practice is not over yet, Parighasana marks a shift in focus, as the remaining postures are meant to integrate rather than challenge your physical and spiritual center.

Once you are ready to proceed, start in Samsthiti. Inhale and raise your hands over your head, pressing your palms together and rolling your elbows toward each other. Exhale and fold forward, placing your hands on the floor at the outsides of your feet, your palms flat on the ground, and your head touching your shins. Inhale, lift your head, and look up while keeping your hands on the ground. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Bend your knees, inhale, and jump through to a seated position; straighten your legs and sit down.



Figure 8.46

Next, bend your right knee while keeping it aligned with your right hip, straight out from your pelvis. Allow a slight internal rotation in your right hip joint, move the flesh of your right calf out of the way, and align your right anklebone with your right trochanter major. Keeping a strong activation of your pelvic floor, extend your left leg out to the side, at a ninety-degree angle from your right leg. Allow a deep external rotation of your left hip joint while elongating your left inner thigh. Point your right foot and flex your left foot to start. Settle both sit bones toward the floor as comfortably as possible. Inhale and take both of your hands to your waist to prepare (see fig. 8.46). Students who are comfortably in this posture can also point both feet to deepen the flexibility and prepare for the alignment in arm balances in the Third Series of Ashtanga Yoga.



Figure 8.47

Be sure to keep your legs open to a maximum ninety-degree angle. One of the most common misalignments in Parighasana is to open the legs too far apart, decreasing the hip flexion of the leg that is bent. Orient your pubic bone ever so slightly to the left, and bend forward into the space between your legs. Allow the movement of your torso to slide between your thighs just as in Tittibhasana and deepen the flexion of your hips. If you do not fold forward before entering the posture fully, you will lose the foundation and grounding through your hips.

Keeping your hips grounded and your right hip flexed, turn your rib cage and torso up and toward the right. Lean to the side as you thread your body around your left leg (see fig. 8.47). Aim your left shoulder forward and wrap it around your left shin. Think about turning your body all the way to the side along the spinal axis while leaning to the left. Grab your left foot with both hands, wrapping your thumbs around your instep and your fingers around the sole of your foot. Rest the back of your head on your left shin. Exhale as you fully enter the posture, eventually coordinating all of these detailed movements into one continuous flow (see fig. 8.48). Stay in the pose for at least five breaths.

Inhale and exit the posture by moving through the same directions in reverse, ending by returning both of your hands to your waist (see fig. 8.46). Exhale while continuing to hold your waist to settle into the posture. Take your hands to the floor and cross your feet; inhale and lift your body off the ground, then exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Bend your knees, inhale, and jump through to a seated position, straighten your legs, and sit down. Repeat the posture on the

opposite side. When you are finished, complete the vinyasa and wait in Adho Mukha Svanasana to proceed to the next pose.



Figure 8.48

While some styles of yoga present Parighasana with the bent leg completely raised off the ground, the Ashtanga Yoga method asks for a deeper internal rotation of the hip joint. It is also important to note that the emphasis is placed on lateral stretching in other versions of Parighasana, while in the Ashtanga Yoga method, the emphasis is placed on a combination of things, including the lateral stretch, the deep flexion of the hips, and the rotation of the torso along its central axis. There are benefits and disadvantages to both versions, just as there are benefits and disadvantages to every situation.

The Ashtanga Yoga method's version of Parighasana challenges the knee that is bent in internal rotation. For students who have completed the Intermediate Series, this should not present a problem. Nevertheless, if you start to feel pain in the knee that is bent, proceed with caution. A good modification if this arises is to allow your pelvis to lift farther off the ground, thereby decreasing the hip flexion and stress through your knee. If you notice that this movement of the hip and knee is challenging for you, good places to work on it are in Tiryang Mukha Ekapada Paschimattanasana from the Primary Series and Krounchasana, Bhekasana, and Bharadvajasana from the Intermediate Series. If, on the other hand, you are having a hard time with the external rotation needed to extend the straight leg, place your emphasis on Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose) from the standing poses and Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend) and Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose) from the Primary Series to create the openness in the extended leg Parighasana.

Parighasana is an intensive lateral stretching posture that equalizes the sacroiliac joints, releases the quadratus lumborum muscles, and tones the abdominal muscles. After all the intensive forward and backward bending in the Intermediate Series, Parighasana is meant to help your body integrate those dynamic states of movement. By elongating laterally, the muscles of your rib cage are also stretched, allowing for a fuller, deeper breath. When you lean to the left, the right side of your body opens while the left side spirals inward. This combination creates an asymmetrical stretch that allows your body to move laterally and releases any imbalance. Do not push too hard in this posture. Allow yourself to be at ease and let the pose create a relaxed, internal focus in your mind. Focus on deepening your breath and turning your mind inward.

BENEFITS

Equalizes the spine and hips

Stabilizes the mind Stretches the sides of the body Energizes the abdominal organs

GOMUKHASANA

Cow Face Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose) / Antara (Up)

Translated as Cow Face Pose, Gomukhasana may also signify something deeper. The Sanskrit word *go* also means "light." Cows themselves carry a spiritual significance in Indian culture. So the more metaphorical definition of Gomukhasana might be related to the light that arises in the head of the yoga practitioner. The Upanishads themselves have been referred to as "cows" in the opening of the great epic of the Bhagavad Gita. To have a head filled with the light that comes from yoga is perhaps also to have the crown chakra fully awakened, symbolized by the thousand-petalled lotus with which Patanjali is typically depicted. The inner light also means the light of knowledge, and it could be argued that the whole journey of yoga is the revelation of the truth in all its purity of expression.

Starting in Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through, straighten your legs, and sit down. Cross your right thigh over your left, then shift your weight forward so the front of your left knee is resting on the ground. Fold your inner thighs around each other to deepen the hip flexion and the rotation of your hip joints. Elevate your hips and thread your lower legs together as closely as possible. Align your heels and point your toes. Actively squeeze your thighs toward the center line of your body to hold your legs firmly in place and establish an inward rotation of your spine, and interlace your fingers under your right knee. Do not round your back too much. If necessary to interlace your fingers, let your back arch slightly. Suck your lower belly in deep and keep your pelvic floor firm. Gaze at your nose (see figs. 8.49 and 8.50). Hold this posture for five breaths.



Figure 8.49

Be aware of the position of your legs throughout the posture, as there is the tendency for the feet and legs to slide apart. Keep your legs firmly rooted in position to create a proper foundation. Do not force yourself to sit on your heels or you may injure your knees. However, if you can take the leg position effortlessly, you can rest your hips on your feet. Let your foundation come from the activation of your pelvic floor. Some people with very muscular legs will have a hard time folding fully into this posture, but they should still work with the same intentions, and eventually the hip joints will open to create the space for the full expression of Gomukhasana. Do not allow your feet to open to lessen the intensity of the hip flexion and rotation. Instead, create the necessary space to enter the posture by opening your hips even more.

Keeping the same leg position, inhale as you lift your right arm over your head and bend the elbow. Bend your left arm behind your back. Externally rotate your right shoulder and internally rotate your left shoulder. Your right elbow can move toward the center of your head but should not pass the center line of your body. Draw your left elbow as close to your body as possible. Interlace your fingers or hold your wrist in between your shoulder blades behind your back. Allow your right tricep and deltoid to elongate, while you let the left rotator cuff muscles relax forward into internal rotation. Drop your head back gently and look up (see figs. 8.51 and 8.52). Hold this position for five breaths.



Figure 8.50

If you cannot reach your fingers, it probably indicates that you should spend more time in the previous backbends and twists from the Intermediate Series. While the demand on your shoulders in Gomukhasana is intense, the earlier poses should establish the minimum range of motion you need to make this posture not only possible but perhaps also enjoyable. If you still cannot interlace your fingers, wait for a teacher to help you bind your hands; if you are practicing alone, use a towel or strap to walk your fingers closer together and ultimately bind them. Once your fingers are interlaced, release the prop. There are two different ways to work your arms once your fingers are interlaced. First, press your hands into the space between your shoulders for an isometric stretch. Second, reach your hands away from your torso to increase the shoulder stretch. Only students who are very flexible should try this second version.



Figure 8.51

After five breaths, release your hands, take them down to the floor, sit back, and remove your legs from the posture. Place your hands on the ground, cross your feet, inhale to lift up, and exhale to jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale as you cross your feet and jump through, straighten your legs, and sit down. Repeat the posture with your right leg on the bottom.

After five breaths in both versions, jump back and complete the vinyasa to Adho Mukha Svanasana where you will flow immediately to the next posture. It is technically acceptable to jump back directly from the posture without unfolding your legs and crossing your feet. However, I recommend cherishing each jump back and jump through in the Intermediate Series, since there are considerably fewer than in the Primary Series. If you want to build and maintain the strength it takes to perform these challenging movements, take every opportunity presented to work on it.

Other styles of yoga present Gomukhasana in a slightly different form. You may see the feet wide apart and the hips settled between the feet, as well as the torso folding forward while in the posture. This variation makes the posture more relaxing and less active in the foundation and pelvic floor, while providing a somewhat deeper release in the hips around the trochanter major.

In the Ashtanga Yoga method, the emphasis is placed on developing a firm connection to the interior space of the pelvis through a deep engagement and awareness of the bandhas. One is not better than the other, it is just important to note the slightly different focus and respect the yoga lineage that is your main discipline.



Figure 8.52

BENEFITS

Stretches the shoulders for a full range of motion through internal and external rotation

Helps relieve mild symptoms of sciatica

Stabilizes the sacroiliac joints

SUPTA URDHVA PADA VAJRASANA

Lifted Sleeping Thunderbolt Pose

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose) / Parsva (Side)

The first time I tried to enter Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana in the traditional manner, I rolled off my mat and landed on someone else. The most confusing part about this posture is how you get into it, but with practice, it will start to make sense. The actual pose is not that different from Bharadvajasana. Many students who can easily practice that asana struggle with the traditional entry into Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana. Yet maintaining dynamic control over your spine and nervous system is the lesson of this portion of the Intermediate Series, and entering a relatively easy posture from a challenging perspective helps test that principle. Some people complain that Ashtanga Yoga makes things unnecessarily hard, but whenever a challenge is presented in this method, it is to test the nervous system and ultimately make you stronger. Such is the case with the traditional entry into Supta Urdhva Pada



Figure 8.53

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through and sit down. Exhale and lie down in a reclining position. Inhale again as you lift your legs over your head to Halasana (Plow Pose; see fig. 8.53); allow your hands to remain unbound. While maintaining the lift through your pelvic floor, fold your right leg into a half-lotus position, roll your right shoulder under, and

wrap your fingers around your lotus foot. Reach toward your left foot with your left hand, binding your fingers around your left big toe (see fig. 8.54). Exhale there to settle into the posture. Use your left hand to help your right foot get into half-lotus, and if necessary, use your left hand to assist your right hand in binding your right foot. Avoid leaning too far to the right in an attempt to swing your shoulder under or take the bind of the lotus foot. Allow the movement of the bind to come from your right shoulder's internal rotation.



Figure 8.54

Once fully bound in the preparatory posture, lift your sit bones as in Halasana; thrust your upper arms and deltoids into the ground, as in Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand); and engage your pelvic floor to lift your hips and keep your spine as straight as possible. Students proficient in Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana will be able to move seamlessly into the preparation with one fluid movement, but do not rush or force yourself to move too quickly. Take extra breaths if necessary to set up properly, and mobilize the full external rotation of your right hip joint to enter half-lotus safely.

This preparation and entry are the foundation of the pose. If you do not have a firm bind between your hands and feet when you initiate the movement to roll into the posture, you will most likely lose the bind. It is important to keep the contact between both hands and feet throughout the roll forward, because it changes the position of your shoulder and creates a different movement mechanic.

You have to actively accept that there will be a short discomfort in your right arm around the elbow when you roll over it. Instead of avoiding this sensation, the lesson of Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana tells you to seek it out and actually use the feeling of discomfort to succeed in the motion. In other words, if you simply release the grip between your right hand and right foot while rolling up to avoid rolling over your arm and elbow, then you will miss the whole point of the difficult transition. From a physical standpoint, you have to roll directly over your elbow to complete the posture, but from a spiritual standpoint, you have to surrender to accepting this discomfort to gain a firm foundation for the posture.

Whereas most practitioners can bind their lotus foot quite easily in Bharadvajasana, many cannot do so in Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana. In the earlier posture, the twist of the spine helps facilitate the bind, but in the preparation for Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana, only the shoulder facilitates the bind. To add challenge to what is already an intensive shoulder opener, the movement is done in a half shoulderstand. By stabilizing your shoulder girdle on the ground, Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana seeks to localize the rotation necessary to take the bind of the lotus foot directly into the shoulder joint itself. Keeping your shoulders on the ground prevents your upper back from compensating and actually creates a healthy and deep internal rotation of your right shoulder. Without the stabilization of your shoulder girdle on the floor, numerous techniques could be recruited to do the work of the shoulder, such as the spinal twist. While the entry into Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana is challenging, it is useful for creating dynamic strength and openness in the shoulders.

Students who are unable to fully bind their lotus foot or whose hands slide off their foot too easily can try an easy modification to simulate the complete posture. Sometimes the foot is simply too sweaty at this point in the practice to get a good grip. The easiest solution is to wrap a towel around it or to wear a sock on the lotus foot so you have the additional friction of the fabric to help create a firm bind. Should this fail to create a stable bind, the final modification is to wrap a towel completely around the lotus foot and then hold onto the towel instead of the foot (see fig. 8.55). Holding on to the towel while you roll up into the posture will lock your shoulder and elbow in place so they will not slide, thereby creating a similar sensation to the full posture. Proceed with this method until your shoulders, hips, and back are open enough to complete the posture.

If the energetics of the posture are integrated, it is not necessary to stop until you have completed the bind and roll-up to the full posture. However, if this posture creates stress, pause here until an inner sense of stability sets in, then continue on to the final portion of the Intermediate Series.



Figure 8.55

After setting up the posture to the best of your ability, inhale as you prepare to roll up. Bend your left knee back, inwardly rotating the hip joint. Align the inside edge of your left foot with the outer edge of your hip. Be sure there is enough space for your hips to reach the ground without jamming your left toes and knee. Point the toes of your left foot firmly. If possible, keep a firm grip only around the left big toe throughout this movement. If you cannot clasp this toe, wrap your whole hand around your left foot the first few times you try this pose. The benefit of this modification is that it ensures that your foot will remain pointed while you move into the full posture. Before you roll up, be sure your left leg is bent, your left knee points up, and you have a firm grip on your left toe (see fig. 8.56). Do not roll up if your foot or left knee is not in position. After your left leg is in place, inhale and roll directly over your right elbow, shoulder, and forearm. Initiate the rolling movement from the strength of your pelvic floor. When rolling over your right elbow, allow your spine to round and curl inward with the support of your core muscles. Avoid pulling too hard with your left arm to roll up. Use only as much force with your left hand as necessary to continue the motion, while keeping the power of the posture localized within your core. Avoid arching your back, and actively round it to roll into the posture.



Figure 8.56

If you land with a loud thud and your hips are the first thing to make contact with the floor, round your back more as you roll into the posture, stabilize your core, and actively thrust your right shoulder into the ground on the way. Once you have landed, you are ready to enter the full expression of Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana.

The first thing to do is reorganize the basic elements of the posture. Stabilize the bind between your right hand and foot. Whereas in Bharadvajasana, the knees are rather far apart, in Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana, the distance is much more narrow. Keeping your sit bones as firmly grounded as possible, bring your knees toward each other, aiming for alignment with your hip joints. Keep the instep of your right foot aligned with your left hip crease. Do not allow the foot to rest on your left thigh. Release the grip of your left hand on your left big toe, and place your left hand on the floor under the outside of your right knee. Flatten the palm and point the fingers toward your left knee. Allow a gentle external rotation of your right shoulder while maintaining an internal rotation of the left.

Entering the twisting portion of the posture follows the same basic principles as Bharadvajasana. Lift the left side of your lower belly and the left side of your rib cage inward and twist to the right. Keep your spine aligned along your central axis, but lean over as much as necessary to flatten your left hand. Eventually, both sit bones will be on the ground as well. Allow your breath to be full and deep. With every inhalation, create space in your body, and with every exhalation twist a little deeper. Gaze to the right, over your shoulder (see fig. 8.57). Keep your lower belly and pelvic floor firmly engaged throughout. After five breaths, release the posture and take your hands to the floor.



Figure 8.57

Inhale, cross your feet, and lift up. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale

and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale, jump through to a seated position, and perform the same movements on the opposite side. After completing five breaths in Supta Urdhva Pada Vajrasana on the left side, jump back and complete the vinyasa to Adho Mukha Svanasana, where you will flow immediately into the next posture.

BENEFITS

Aligns the spine and sacrum

Opens the shoulders and chest

Relieves stress

Stimulates digestion

Activates samana

The Seven Headstands

WHEN I LEARNED THIS PRACTICE FROM GURUJI AND Sharath, the seven headstands were already a part of the Intermediate Series practice. However, they are not technically part of the Intermediate Series. Guruji sometimes indicated that they are like the icing on the cake, added on at the end of the practice. When students start the challenging practice of the Ashtanga Yoga Third Series, known as Advanced A, the seven headstands are removed from the daily practice and replaced with whatever advanced postures the teachers have given to the students. This would verify the notion that the seven headstands are technically not part of the Second Series, because in no other practice throughout the six Ashtanga series are we asked to remove certain sections while moving on to the next.

For practical purposes, it is not useful to think of the seven headstands as separate, because they are meant to be practiced with the daily discipline of the Intermediate Series. Some people have suggested stringing them all together and staying up for a total of thirty-five breaths while switching the hand positions. This is generally not a good idea due to the risk of neck injury. Additionally, one of the main benefits of the seven headstands is the strength-building process of the vinyasas, the jump back from Mukta Hasta Sirsasana that is repeated seven times. Jumping back in between each of the seven headstands builds intense shoulder strength, stability, and endurance, all of which are needed for the Third Series. Holding the seven headstands also reestablishes your center line after all the forward and backward movements of the Intermediate Series. Being able to perform all seven headstands shows articulation of the shoulder girdle in a variety of circumstances and demonstrates flexible strength in the shoulder joints. The long series of inversions shows that the spiritual aspects of Sirsasana are in place, because you end up holding the inverted position for between three and five minutes —perhaps more when following a guided Intermediate Series class.

If you lose your balance in any of these headstands, there are two easy ways to fall. If you fall back, then you can either land in the same position as you started, or you can change your hands to the tripod position from Mukta Hasta Sirsasana and simply fall back. If you fall forward, do not release your hands and roll forward, a technique often recommended for beginners to fall out of Sirsasana. Instead, since your neck is often unsupported in these headstands, it is easier for the Intermediate student to fall over in a backbend. Your flexibility in the spinal extension should be sufficiently established by this point to allow you to fall over into a backbend without any stress. Should you fall into a backbend, simply lie down, come out of the pose, and try it again. There is no need to flip back over from the backbend. Of course, it is best not to fall, but it happens to even the most balanced, strongest practitioners, so it is important that you understand how to execute the movement safely to give yourself confidence in your practice.

Perhaps most important in the seven headstands is not to rush through them. Breathe deeply and focus on the intensive strength-building process.

MUKTA HASTA SIRSASANA A

Open Hand / Unsupported Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Known in English as Tripod Headstand, Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A is the foundational headstand that defines the final portion of the Intermediate Series. Take your time to set this posture up well, and the remaining six headstands will be easy for you.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you prepare for the pose, settling your hands and head into the ground in a tripod position and keeping your legs in a pike position (see fig. 9.1). Your hands form the base of an equilateral triangle, and your head forms the tip. There are at least three ways to get into this preparatory posture from Adho Mukha Svanasana, all of

which are equally valid. Starting off with the easiest, come to your knees from Adho Mukha Svanasana, bend your elbows so your forearms are perpendicular and your upper arms parallel to the floor. Draw your elbows toward each other to activate your rotator cuff muscles, and align your elbows directly over your palms. Straighten your legs and walk in toward your head by pivoting into your hip joints. Be sure your neck is straight and the very top part of your head is pressing into the ground.



Figure 9.1

If this was easy, try walking your feet in a little while you are in Adho Mukha Svanasana, bending your elbows, leaning forward into the foundation of your shoulder girdle, and gently placing the top of your head on the ground. Do not come down on your knees.

Finally, if you are ready for the ultimate challenge, move directly from Adho Mukha Svanasana into the preparatory posture by engaging your core muscles and shoulder girdle to land softly. After you prepare, inhale and pivot forward through your hip joints to send your pelvis forward. Keep your pelvic floor engaged and your abdominal muscles sucked in. Strengthen your quadriceps, adduct your thighs, and point your toes. Do not jump or bend your knees. Shift your hips forward into the solid foundation of your shoulders and your core and lift your legs up. Once your legs reach a ninetydegree angle and are parallel to the floor, tuck your tailbone, draw your lower ribs in toward the center line of body, and point your feet up to the ceiling to come into the full posture (see fig. 9.2).

Consciously draw your elbows in to maintain the initial alignment with your palms. Find your balance by aligning your body along the central axis through which your weight will effortlessly be distributed into the earth. Do not force or muscle your way into the pose. Let balance be expressed through the combination of strength and grace. Consciously keep your neck straight, and do not allow any movement through the top of your head or your neck. Do not push your head into the floor, simply keep your body aligned along the center line and you will balance naturally.

After five breaths, you are ready to jump back. If you have mastered jumping back from Pinchamayurasana, then this will be easy. There are at least two acceptable ways to work on this movement. Starting with the easier one, shift your hips forward to allow your legs to drop back to ninety degrees, parallel to the floor. Keep your core engaged and your shoulder girdle firm (see fig. 9.3). Flex your feet to prepare for the landing. Exhale and press through your arms, engage your quadriceps, and lift your head to land in Chaturanga Dandasana. This movement softens the landing, gives a little more core support, stabilizes your shoulders, and may feel safer.



Figure 9.2

If this exit was easy, you may be ready for the harder version, which I call "timber" because you fall to the ground like a tall tree. Starting off in the full posture, exhale as you engage your core, firm your shoulder girdle, flex your feet, and shift your chest forward to land in Chaturanga Dandasana directly from Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A. You will need strong shoulders, firm bandhas, and healthy alignment in Chaturanga Dandasana to attempt this version. After landing, inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

While there should be little risk of falling if you have made it this far in the Intermediate Series, the safest way to fall over is to simply allow your spine to arch and land in a semi-backbend. Do not attempt to roll over your neck or twist to the side, as this may damage your neck. In fact, try to avoid any movements or gyrations of your neck. Keep it stable, strong, and supported by your shoulders. Do not dump your weight into your head. Let your whole body play a part in lifting up.



Figure 9.3

A major contraindication even for advanced practitioners is a serious preexisting neck injury, such as herniated or prolapsed disks or whiplash. Unfortunately, there is no real modification for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A, so you should simply skip not only this posture, but all three unsupported
headstands, if the injury is severe. The supported headstands (Baddha Hasta Sirsasana A, B, and C) should be possible for you.

BENEFITS

Strengthens, aligns, and stabilizes the shoulder girdle Calms the mind Regulates the breath Cleanses the lymphatic system Stimulates the pineal and pituitary glands



Figure 9.4

MUKTA HASTA SIRSASANA B

Open Hand / Unsupported Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Mukta Hasta Sirsasana B looks much harder than it really is. The placement of the arms plays psychological games with the mind, but the actual strength through the shoulders should already be established. It is really no more difficult than Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A, even though it seems much more challenging. Set your mind on doing it, and you will. At this point in the Intermediate Series, you should have no strength or flexibility limitations to your achievement of this posture. Conversely, novice students should never attempt any of the headstands in this chapter without the supervision of -a qualified teacher.

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower down into the easy preparatory posture for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A, with your knees on the floor. You generally should not attempt to change the position of your arms while your legs are straight because this places a lot of unnecessary weight on your head and pressure on your neck. While your knees remain on the floor, turn your palms over and straighten your arms, then straighten your legs to come into the preparatory position for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana B (see fig. 9.4).

Your palms are turned up and the backs of your hand rest on the floor, so when you press through your fingertips, it is through the backs of the fingertips and the nails. Align your hands with your shoulders and spread your fingers apart. Press the tips of your fingers and your wrists into the ground. Actively reach through your fingers to create length and strength in your shoulders. Firm your deltoid, rotator cuff, latissimus dorsi, and serratus anterior muscles. Once your shoulders are locked in place, do not let them waver at any time in the movement. Your shoulders need to demonstrate strength and articulation of movement.

From the preparatory posture, pivot forward through your hip joints, engaging your pelvic floor and core muscles to lift your legs. Do not jump or lift one leg at a time. Once your legs reach ninety degrees and are parallel to the floor, start to tuck your tailbone, draw your thighs toward each other, and reach your toes toward the ceiling to enter full Mukta Hasta Sirsasana B (see fig. 9.5). Establish the center line of your body by drawing all your muscles in and up. Do not dump the weight of your body into your shoulders or neck. Lift your entire body and distribute the work of the posture equally throughout.



Figure 9.5

After five breaths, exhale as you switch your hands back to Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A position while maintaining the balance through your center line. Continuing the exhalation, jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner outlined earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

MUKTA HASTA SIRSASANA C

Open Hand / Unsupported Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower into the first, easier preparatory posture for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A with your knees on the floor. Stretch your arms out to the side while keeping your palms on the ground. Ideally your hands should be aligned with your ears, but this is a very challenging position. If you are trying the pose for the first time, or if your balance is less than stable, place your hands slightly in front of your head, but as close to alignment with your ears as possible. Stand your legs up to enter the preparatory posture (see fig. 9.6). Gently grip your fingertips into the floor and press each palm down as firmly as possible.

Actively reach through your fingers to create length and strength in your shoulders. Do not push or pull your arms; simply engage your shoulder girdle and keep it locked in place. Firm your deltoid, rotator cuff, latissimus dorsi, and serratus anterior muscles. Once your shoulders are settled, do not let them waver at any time during this movement. Just as in the previous posture, your shoulders need to demonstrate strength and articulation of movement.

Preparing to enter the full pose, pivot forward through your hip joints, engaging your pelvic floor and core muscles, and inhale to lift your legs. Do not jump or lift one leg at a time. The balance in Mukta Hasta Sirsasana C is the hardest out of all seven headstands in the Intermediate Series. It will help if you maintain a balanced attitude throughout your practice of this posture. Do not throw your body up with too much force. Instead coordinate the movement to lift your legs on a long, steady inhalation. Once your legs reach ninety degrees and are parallel to the floor, start to tuck your tailbone, draw your thighs toward each other, and reach your toes toward the ceiling to enter full Mukta Hasta Sirsasana C (see fig. 9.7).

Use your fingers and your pelvic floor for balance. Avoid arching your back, and establish the center line of your body by drawing all your muscles in and up. Do not dump the weight of your body into your shoulders or neck. Lift your entire body and distribute the work of the posture equally throughout.



Figure 9.6

After five breaths, exhale as you switch your hands back to Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A position while maintaining the balance through your center line. Continuing the exhalation, jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner outlined earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.



Figure 9.7

BADDHA HASTA SIRSASANA A

Bound Hand Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

In Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower your knees to the ground. Bend your arms and place your elbows on the floor in alignment with your shoulders. Interlock your fingers while maintaining open palms. Create a stable tripod base between your elbows and hands. Firm your deltoids, activate your rotator cuff muscles, and engage your latissimus dorsi muscles. Students who are very comfortable with the foundational position of the shoulders, elbows, and hands can enter the pose directly from Adho Mukha Svanasana without putting their knees on the ground. Students who need or just prefer to set up in a more relaxed manner should place their knees on the ground while preparing the base of the posture.

Having settled your elbows and hands on the ground, place the top of your head on the ground and cradle the back of your head with your open palms. Stand your legs up while lifting your pelvic floor into the interior space of your body. Suck in your lower belly to hollow out your pelvis, and walk your feet in as close to your body as possible to prepare (see fig. 9.8). Inhale as you pivot into your hip joints, send your center of gravity forward over the foundation of your arms, and allow your legs and feet to slowly lift off the ground. Lift your kneecaps to keep your legs active.

After your legs reach a ninety-degree angle and are parallel to the floor, begin tucking your tailbone and drawing your legs back toward your center line. Point your toes actively toward the ceiling and lift up with the strength of your entire body to find your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana A (see fig. 9.9). Most students who have succeeded in following the traditional Ashtanga Yoga method of practice will find this posture easy, as it is the same headstand included in the closing postures, which were introduced in the Primary Series.

After five breaths, prepare to jump back. While maintaining your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana A, move your hands into the tripod position as outlined for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A. Do not attempt to move your hands while you exit the posture, as it is precarious to have mobility in your shoulders while you are descending. Change your hand position first, then exhale as you jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner outlined earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.



Figure 9.8

While this movement is the same exit as indicated for the previous headstands, some students find it difficult to move their hands from the bound position behind their head. If you find this movement challenging, it can help to practice releasing the grip of your interlocked fingers while in the preparatory posture so you build the muscle memory of the movement initiation pattern. It can also be useful to have someone spot you while you move your hands for the first time. After you try a few times with success, you will be using empirical evidence based on your own experience to build your faith in your ability. Do not do this too close to the wall, because you need to have space to complete the vinyasa when you do succeed at finally jumping back.

BADDHA HASTA SIRSASANA B

Bound Hand Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Baddha Hasta Sirsasana B looks much harder than it is. Do not get psyched out by the strange position of the arms. If you maintain the strength of your shoulder girdle and core muscles throughout this posture, it will be as easy as any other headstand. If you feel yourself edging toward nervousness or fear, remember to talk to yourself and use your inner, meditative awareness to remain calm.



Figure 9.9

In Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower your knees to the ground. Bend your arms and place your elbows on the floor in alignment with your shoulders. Wrap the fingers of your right hand around your left bicep and hold on to the outside of the left tricep. Thread your left arm on top of your right forearm and guide the fingers of your left hand around the right elbow crease. Do not grip with these fingers. Instead, reach them outward, keep them firm, and press the back of your left hand into your right arm and your right palm into your left arm, directly above and behind the elbow joints.

Create a stable base by actively thrusting your elbows into the ground and keeping your fingers firm. Use your hands to press down through your elbow

joints. The use of the muscles and activation of your shoulder girdle remain the same despite the different position of your arms. Keep your deltoid, rotator cuff, and latissimus dorsi muscles engaged and firm. Place your head down in the same position, in front of your elbows, to maintain a tripod base between the points of your two elbows and the top of your head. While your hands are folded over your arms, the actual base of the tripod remains proportionally the same.



Figure 9.10



Figure 9.11

If you are in doubt about how far forward to place your head, mark the position of your head and elbows in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana A, then maintain that mark throughout all the variations of Baddha Hasta Sirsasana. In this variation, your head does not need to rest on your forearms, but the distance between your elbows and head must remain even to create a stable foundation for the posture and your shoulders, which are bearing the weight of your body. Once this is established and you feel confident that your neck is in alignment with the center line of your body and supported by your shoulders, you are ready to attempt the posture.

Stand your legs up while lifting your pelvic floor into the interior space of your body. Suck in your lower belly to hollow out your pelvis, and walk your feet in as close to your body as possible to prepare (see fig. 9.10). Inhale as you pivot into your hip joints, send your center of gravity forward over the foundation of your arms, and allow your legs and feet to slowly lift off the ground. Lift your kneecaps to keep your legs active. After your legs reach ninety degrees and are parallel to the floor, begin tucking your tailbone and drawing your legs back toward your center line. Point your toes actively toward the ceiling and lift up with the strength of your entire body to find your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana B (see fig. 9.11).

After five breaths, prepare to jump back. While maintaining your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana B, move your hands to the tripod position outlined for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A. Do not attempt to move your hands while you exit the posture, as it is precarious to have mobility in your shoulders while you are descending. Change your hand position first, then exhale as you jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner described earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BADDHA HASTA SIRSASANA C

Bound Hand Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

For students with tighter shoulders, Baddha Hasta Sirsasana C may be more difficult than it looks. It appears to be easier than the previous headstand; however, you will need ample shoulder flexibility to lift up properly. If you found the backbends of the Intermediate Series rather easy, then the shoulder flexibility in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana C should not be an issue for you.

In Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower your knees to the ground. Bend your arms and place your elbows on the floor in alignment with your shoulders. Keep your wrists forward, in alignment with your elbows, just as in Pinchamayurasana. The use of the muscles and activation of your shoulder girdle remain the same despite the different position of your arms. Keep your deltoid, rotator cuff, and latissimus dorsi muscles engaged and firm. Place your head down in the same position, in front of your elbows, to maintain a tripod base between the points of your elbows and the top of your head. Although your hands are outstretched, the actual base of the tripod remains proportionally the same. Avoid gripping the floor with your fingers or keeping your fingers too close to your head. Press your elbows down firmly. Students with tighter shoulders will notice that as they attempt to enter the posture, their elbows will want to lift off the ground. Avoid this by elongating your triceps while firming your shoulder girdle to maintain stability.



Figure 9.12



Figure 9.13

Stand your legs up while lifting your pelvic floor into the interior space of your body. Suck in your lower belly to hollow out your pelvis, and walk your feet in as close to your body as possible to prepare (see fig. 9.12). Inhale as you pivot into your hip joints, send your center of gravity forward over the foundation of your arms, and allow your legs and feet to slowly lift off the

ground. Lift your kneecaps to keep your legs active. After your legs reach ninety degrees and are parallel to the floor, begin tucking your tailbone and drawing your legs back toward your center line. Point your toes actively toward the ceiling, and lift upward with the strength of your entire body to find your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana C (see fig. 9.13).

After five breaths, prepare to jump back. While maintaining your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana C, move your hands to the tripod position described for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A. Do not attempt to move your hands while you exit the posture, as it is precarious to have mobility in your shoulders while you are descending. Change your hand position first, then exhale as you jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner described earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

BADDHA HASTA SIRSASANA D

Bound Hand Headstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Baddha Hasta Sirsasana D is the last posture of the Intermediate Series. When you are a regular practitioner of this series, you will grow to love this pose because it signals the completion of your journey into the challenging work of the Intermediate Series. The practice is, of course, not totally over, since there are still backbends and closing postures, but it is a milestone worth noting. Regardless of how long you have been practicing, take a moment when you get here to congratulate yourself for all the hard work that you have put into developing your yoga practice.

Each day of practice marks one more step along the spiritual yoga path. If you learn to be truly grateful for each day and each practice, you will truly appreciate each posture, and the lessons of yoga will be integrated deeply into the fabric of your being. The longer you practice, the more consciously you will need to remember to take nothing for granted; choose to see each posture as fresh to keep the magic of yoga alive in your heart throughout your life. While you will be balancing on your elbows, the posture looks dramatically harder than it really is. The elbows are a surprisingly stable base for headstands, and as long as your head also presses into the ground, it is relatively easy to balance. There is a posture in the Ashtanga Yoga Fourth Series called Shayanasana (Suspension Posture) that is a true elbow balance and is nearly impossible. Maintaining proper alignment in your shoulder girdle here will prepare you to attempt that truly challenging asana one day.

In Adho Mukha Svanasana, exhale as you lower your knees to the ground. Bend your arms and place your elbows on the floor in alignment with your shoulders. Keep your wrists forward, in alignment with your elbows, just as in Pinchamayurasana. The use of the muscles and activation of your shoulder girdle remain the same despite the different position of your arms. Keep your deltoid, rotator cuff, and latissimus dorsi muscles engaged and firm. Place your head down in the same position, in front of your elbows, to maintain a tripod base between the points of your elbows and the top of your head. Once your head is down, bend your elbows and place your palms on your trapezius muscles, possibly aligning your little fingers with the base of your cervical spine. Do not grip the muscles; instead, reach your fingers upward and layer your hands into the line of your torso. Press your elbows into the ground to create a stable foundation and maintain strength through your shoulders.

Stand your legs up while lifting your pelvic floor into the interior space of your body. Suck in your lower belly to hollow out your pelvis, and walk your feet in as close to your body as possible to prepare in the manner outlined earlier.



Figure 9.14

Inhale as you pivot into your hip joints, send your center of gravity forward over the foundation of your arms. and allow your legs and feet to slowly lift off the ground. Lift your kneecaps to keep your legs active. After your legs reach ninety degrees and are parallel to the floor, begin tucking your tailbone and drawing your legs back toward your center line. Point your toes actively toward the ceiling and lift up with the strength of your entire body to find your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana D (see fig. 9.14).

After five breaths, prepare to jump back. While maintaining your balance in Baddha Hasta Sirsasana D, move your hands to the tripod position outlined for Mukta Hasta Sirsasana A. Do not attempt to move your hands while you exit the posture, as it is precarious to have mobility in your shoulders while you are descending. Change your hand position first, then exhale as you jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana in the manner described earlier. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana.

Backbends and Handstands

BACKBENDS AND DROP BACKS ARE STANDARD COMPONENTS of every Ashtanga Yoga practice, regardless of what series you are working on. When you have reached your final pose in the Intermediate Series (whatever pose that may be), you should proceed directly to Urdhva Danurasana (see fig. 10.2) and Drop Backs (see fig. 10.6) to complete the backbending portion of your practice. In every Ashtanga Yoga practice, backbends end with Paschimattanasana (see fig. 10.12) and move from there directly to the closing postures.

Since one of the first requirements for starting regular practice of the Intermediate Series is doing the backbending sequence (including drop backs) correctly, all students ideally should already be able to perform these movements, which are described in this chapter. If you are new to dropping back and standing up and require more detailed explanation, please consult *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga* for an in-depth technical explanation for all levels. Students who are working on the Intermediate Series should focus on deepening their backbends.

If you are practicing the Primary Series and adding on the first portion of the Intermediate Series up until Tittibhasana, the best way for you to deepen your backbend is to progress to Tiriang Mukhottanasana A (Intense Stretch Backbend A; see fig. 10.10), a very deep backbend in which you wrap your hands around your ankles. This can be done on your own or with the help of a teacher. Detailed instructions are given in this chapter. If you have progressed to Pinchamayurasana and beyond, you are ready for the addition of the full advanced Ashtanga Yoga backbending routine, including Adho Mukha Vrksasana (see fig. 10.7), Viparita Chakrasana (Flipped-Over Wheel Pose; see fig. 10.9), Taraksvasana (Scorpion Handstand, see fig. 10.8), and Tiriang Mukhottanasana B (see fig. 10.11). This is a complex movement sequence

that can either be learned all together with the help of a teacher or broken down into small segments that you can build up to on your own. Both methods are explained here.

The appropriate time to start integrating handstands into your practice is after you start working on Pinchamayurasana. If you start practicing handstands too soon, your body will not be prepared, and you risk either injuring yourself or creating so much tightness and tension in your body that you will inhibit your progress in this part of the series. This moratorium on integrating handstands into your daily practice also includes any lift-ups or half-handstands used during the vinyasa. If you are following the traditional Ashtanga Yoga method, be patient, do the work of the postures as they arise, and humbly surrender to the journey.

While the handstand practice looks fun and exciting, when you realize that you will have to do it nearly every day, it eventually loses its new appeal and evolves into a very demanding component of the practice—but one that will help develop the inner awareness of your body and mind. Once you begin practicing this routine every day, it is important to maintain consistency. If you only attempt the challenging poses on days when you feel good, improvement will be slow. Just as with any part of the practice, it must be ritualized and established in your daily discipline. Treat this addition as a regular part of practice, not an optional part at the end. If you give yourself the choice of skipping what is for many students the hardest portion of the practice, you will often find it too tempting to just move on to the closing postures and skip over some of the intensive backbends. You naturally get better at anything you practice every day, whereas you'll see only sporadic improvement at anything you practice occasionally. If you do not give yourself the option to quit, chances are that you will one day succeed.

URDHVA DANURASANA AND DROP BACKS

Lifted Bow Pose and Drop Backs

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

From Adho Mukha Svanasana, inhale as you jump through to a reclining posture. Exhale and prepare for Urdhva Danurasana by bending your knees and elbows, keeping your feet parallel, placing your hands under your shoulders, and aligning your elbows, wrists, and shoulders (see fig. 10.1). Inhale and lift off the ground to full Urdhva Danurasana (see fig. 10.2). Rotate your hip joints inward; relax your gluteal muscles to open space in your sacroiliac joints and between the intervertebral disks. Squeeze your elbows toward each other and keep your deltoids centered over your palms. Thrust your iliac crests and hips up and forward, keep your pelvic floor firmly activated, and engage your legs by pressing into your heels. Hold for five breaths. Exhale and place your head on the floor, but do not come all the way down (see fig. 10.3).



Figure 10.1



Figure 10.2

Walk your hands closer to your feet to deepen the posture, keeping your elbows aligned with your hands and shoulders. Each time you walk your hands closer to your feet, pick your head up and move it closer, so that your head, shoulders, and torso follow the movement of your hands. Inhale and lift back up into Urdhva Danurasana. If your backbend feels good and your mind is calm, then walk your hands in closer to your feet, while keeping your heels pressed firmly into the ground.

Repeat one to three more times, depending on your level of flexibility. Do not push too hard. If your backbend does not feel good, avoid crunching your lower back or lifting your heels to try to walk your hands in. After five breaths in the full pose, exhale and come down on your head for one breath (see fig. 10.3). Gently inch your head a little closer to your feet and allow your hands to follow. Inhale as you lift back up into your last Urdhva Danurasana. Walk your hands as far in toward your feet as possible without lifting your heels off the ground or compressing your spine.



Figure 10.3

After at least five breaths, instead of returning your head and/or body to the floor, inhale and stand directly up from Urdhva Danurasana by sending your hips forward, pressing firmly into the foundation of your legs, and letting your torso and head follow that movement forward and up. Some students find it challenging to stand up from the final Urdhva Danurasana, since the traditional three Ashtanga Yoga backbends are challenging in terms of endurance. It is not uncommon for your thighs to burn and your breath to be stressed at the end of these three backbends, in which case it can be helpful to come up on your fingertips to help transfer your weight forward into your feet as you come up to standing (see fig. 10.4).



Figure 10.4

Once you have returned to standing, it is time to drop back to and stand up from Urdhva Danurasana. This is traditionally done three times in rapid succession with each of the three movements strung together. However, many students need a few extra moments to compose themselves between each drop back. It is more important to retain conscious control over your nervous system than to try to rush the process to fit the perfect mold. Keep your attention on the inner experience.

To proceed, keep your feet parallel and hip-width apart. Place your hands in prayer position at the center of your heart (see fig. 10.5). Extend your arms over your head and straighten your elbows. Send your hips forward to counterbalance the extension of your spine and arms. Arch your spine back powerfully to create space between the vertebrae. Hang in this position as long as necessary to create space deep within your body (see fig. 10.6).

When you can see the mat, ground your heels, gently bend your knees, and exhale to drop back into Urdhva Danurasana. If your hands land far away from your heels, you may want to walk your hands in a little closer before standing back up. If necessary, take a moment to reconnect to your breath and bandhas in Urdhva Danurasana. But if your backbend feels open and stable, then inhale and come directly back up to standing. Repeat this movement two more times.



Figure 10.5



Figure 10.6

If your practice stops at any of the Intermediate postures before Pinchamayurasana, you should move directly into Tiriang Mukhottanasana A and Paschimattanasana, either with the assistance of a qualified teacher or on your own. The exact method is outlined in this chapter. If your practice stops at either Pinchamayurasana or any of the subsequent postures, you should begin practicing the intense handstand and backbending routine known as Tic-Tocs. An abbreviated description, including technical instructions for each of the poses and movements and some suggestions for students who are learning this on their own and need to break down the movement, is given here.

THE TIC-TOC ROUTINE

After standing up from your last drop back into Urdhva Danurasana, step to the back of your mat. Place your hands down in a shortened Adho Mukha Svanasana, firm your shoulder girdle and core muscles, and keep your legs glued together. Inhale as you jump into Adho Mukha Vrksasana (see fig. 10.7), reach your feet forward toward your head, and move through Taraksvasana (see fig. 10.8). Do not hold in Taraksvasana, just move fluidly through the posture. If your feet do not touch your head, then simply bring them close to it. Then exhale and land softly in Urdhva Danurasana (see fig. 10.2). Inhale as you jump back onto your arms, jumping through Taraksvasana to return to Adho Mukha Vrksasana, and finally return to the initial starting posture. Repeat this movement two more times.



Figure 10.7

Next, inhale as you jump into Adho Mukha Vrksasana. This time do not reach your feet toward your head. Instead, reach your feet away from your head and elongate your back as much as possible while keeping your legs straight (see fig. 10.9). Deepen your spinal extension as much as possible, lift your head, and shift your shoulders back. Don't stay here for too long; just flow through the balance point. Exhale and land softly in Urdhva Danurasana. Inhale and stand up immediately; step your feet toward the back of your mat. Repeat these handstand drop overs twice for a total of three times. Then inhale as you jump into Adho Mukha Vrksasana, reach your feet forward toward your head, and hold in Taraksvasana for five breaths. Exhale and land softly in Urdhva Danurasana; immediately stand up.

Finally, move on to binding your hands to your ankles or higher on your leg in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A or B (see figs. 10.10 and 10.11), either on your own or with the assistance of a teacher. If you are working with a teacher, it is best to learn the assisted drop back routine under his or her direct supervision. All teachers have their own style of assisting, and you should respect your daily teacher's style.



Figure 10.8

If you are working on your own, hold Tiriang Mukhottanasana A or B for five breaths. Inhale as you return to standing. As part of your daily practice, it is usually okay to sit down directly in preparation without performing a vinyasa. If you have done very deep backbends, you will find it useful to sit down slowly by bending your knees into your chest, drawing your thighs inward, pivoting from your hips, and allowing your back a chance to unroll gently on the way to the floor. Once seated, straighten your legs and reach your arms forward, interlacing your fingers around the soles of your feet. However, the traditional vinyasa starts off from Samsthiti in the same manner as outlined for Surya Namaskara A and proceeds from Adho Mukha Svanasana via jumping through to prepare. If you have the energy and feel that you would benefit from this traditional vinyasa, feel welcome to integrate it into your practice.



Figure 10.9



Figure 10.10



Figure 10.11

From your seated position with your legs outstretched, inhale and prepare for Paschimattanasana by elongating your spine. Exhale and fold forward into Paschimattanasana (see fig. 10.12). Hold this posture for ten breaths, either on your own or with the assistance of a qualified teacher.



Figure 10.12

ADHO MUKHA VRKSASANA

Flipped-Over-Tree Pose / Handstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

In some ways, Adho Mukha Vrksasana is the holy grail of the physical asana practice because it is a posture that few can master and even those who practice it regularly can almost always improve. It is a pose that has so many variations and is used for so many transitions that it appears in nearly every style of yoga. Even outside the world of yoga, a solid handstand is a benchmark of strength for many physical disciplines. It is also a perfect test of healthy shoulder, core, and back alignment.

What is perhaps most distinctive about the approach that Ashtanga Yoga takes to handstands is their placement in the practice and their inclusion as part of the backbending sequence. Placing them here, in the midst of spinal extensions, challenges your mental and physical strength and stamina. While it might seem that a straight handstand would be easier to control before you have done the deep work of backbends, if you can practice handstands now, as part of the backbending routine, then you have come a long way toward mastering them.

After you stand up from your last Urdhva Danurasana, step back to Adho Mukha Svanasana to prepare. Many people find it intimidating to jump into Adho Mukha Vrksasana directly from Adho Mukha Svanasana. Starting off in a shortened version of Adho Mukha Svanasana may help you jump your hips forward over the foundation of your arms. Gaze at your mat in the space just in front of and between your index fingers. Before you jump, you have to build your foundation in your arms and core. Engage your deltoid, latissimus dorsi, serratus anterior, and rotator cuff muscles. Straighten your elbows and do your best not to let them bend. If you start bending your arms in Adho Mukha Vrksasana, it is a hard habit to break. To get your shoulders in position, first draw your shoulder blades down your back to create space around your neck. Then wrap your shoulder blades forward toward your rib cage, and extend your shoulders upward to create space and strength. This will naturally lift your shoulder blades, like a swimmer's arms reaching forward for maximum length, and like Ekam, the very first breath of the practice. Keep your collarbones broad even as you press up with your shoulders.

As you prepare to jump forward, first shift your shoulders and chest over your palms. Do not take your shoulders past your fingertips while jumping or preparing to jump, or you will destabilize your shoulder girdle. Once you feel stable in your shoulders, connect down into the root of your pelvis. Inhale and jump your hips forward over the solid foundation of your arms and upper body. Do not kick one leg up in the air; either draw your knees into your chest, or keep your legs straight and raise them until they are parallel to the ground. Activate your pelvic floor and come to a ninety-degree angle (see fig. 10.13).



Figure 10.13

Jumping up into Adho Mukha Vrksasana with both legs at the same time is recommended in Ashtanga Yoga. Repeating the same method as for finding the vertical line in the seven headstands (see chapter 9), from the ninety-degree angle, draw your tailbone under so it reaches toward your pubic bone. Activate your pelvic floor and your lower and transverse abdominal muscles, and squeeze them in toward your center. Bring your thighs together and activate the muscles of your buttocks to straighten your body along its vertical axis. Once your legs lift off the ground, you must immediately connect them to your core strength. Activate your thighs, point your toes, and draw your kneecaps up if your legs are straight. Once your hips shift forward over your foundation, hold here for a moment to be sure you are stable. Then begin to tuck your tailbone as your legs extend up toward the vertical line. Squeeze your thighs toward each other, and reach your pointed toes toward the ceiling to come fully into Adho Mukha Vrksasana (see fig. 10.7).

Stack your body in as straight a line as possible. Do not arch your back to find the balance; instead, distribute your weight evenly along your central axis. Press firmly into the bases and pads of your thumbs, and allow your body to reach forward and bear down with pressure on the knuckles of your index fingers. Finally, grip your fingertips gently into the ground. Keep your fingers in a neutral position; avoid spreading them too far apart or keeping them too close together. Be sure that your wrists are parallel with the front line of your back so your hands are not turned in or out.

You can control your balance in Adho Mukha Vrksasana with small movements of your hands and fingers and the strong activation of your pelvic floor. If you start to fall forward into a backbend, you can press your fingertips into the ground and tuck your tailbone. If you fall backward into a pike, you can press the heels of your hands down and point your toes toward the front of your mat. Ideally, you maintain your balance at the centers of your palms, keeping your weight evenly distributed between the right and left sides and your breathing free.

Once you reach the vertical line, keep extending your shoulders and actively reaching up with your whole body. From this place of stable balance, continue into Viparita Chakrasana. If you lose your balance, the best way to fall is to drop over into Urdhva Danurasana, which will lead you directly into the next segment of this routine.

If you are not yet comfortable dropping over from Adho Mukha Vrksasana, or if you are just working on finding your balance and strength in this pose before proceeding, you can lower back to Uttanasana, or the dwe position (see fig. 10.14), with a slow steady exhalation.

As you go down, follow the same movements in reverse. Send your hips back while pressing through the strength of your core and shoulders. Once your hips start to drop toward the ground and your thighs fold into the chest, shift your shoulders forward to compensate and engage your core to control your landing. Maintain equal strength in all your muscles throughout this motion. Whether you are continuing on to Viparita Chakrasana or lowering down to Uttanasana, do not let your mind waver as you go through this movement, or you will fall.



Figure 10.14

If you are stopping at the straight handstand work, you can proceed from here to Tiriang Mukhottanasana A. Otherwise continue directly from Adho Mukha Vrksasana into Viparita Chakrasana.

BENEFITS

Strengthens and stretches the shoulders Builds mental and physical stamina Concentrates the mind Tones the core Enhances self-confidence Treats depression

VIPARITA CHAKRASANA

Flipped-Over Wheel Pose

Drishti: Changeable

In the Ashtanga Yoga method, Adho Mukha Vrksasana is integrated into Viparita Chakrasana. After you find your balance through the vertical line as outlined for the preceding pose, progress directly to Viparita Chakrasana without coming down.

From Adho Mukha Vrksasana, switch your gaze toward the front of your mat. Do not aim your feet immediately toward your head. Instead create as much length as possible between your vertebrae. Keep your legs glued together and rotate your thighs inward while engaging your inner thighs to stabilize your pelvis (see fig. 10.9). Do not let your back soften too much or drop too far down, or you run the risk of compressing your vertebrae. Do not attempt to shorten the back of your spine or pull your pelvis close to your head with your back muscles. Instead, focus on creating length and extension in your spine.

Shift your head forward while lifting your chest, and look for the same sensation as in Urdhva Mukha Svanasana. Press actively into your arms and keep your deltoids and shoulders centered over your palms as much as possible. Use your legs to reach away from the foundation of your arms and counterbalance the spinal extension and weight in your chest. Stay in this hollowback position with your legs extended for a few breaths.

After you reach your maximum depth, allow your legs to separate slightly and your knees to bend toward your head. Do not worry if they do not touch, as you are not required to hold Taraksvasana here. Do not squeeze your knees toward your head, as that will only give you cramps in your hamstrings. Bending your knees merely helps you move in the direction necessary to complete the movement.

Exhale as you allow your feet to land on the floor in Urdhva Danurasana (see fig. 10.2). It is crucial that you attempt to land as slowly and softly as possible. If you just throw your weight over, you may place too much pressure on your spine and shift your shoulders either forward or backward and away from their alignment over your palms. Keeping your shoulders over your palms will deepen your backbend and strengthen your shoulders as you land. To soften the landing, keep pressing into your arms and engaging your pelvic floor. Do not dump your weight forward toward your feet, or you will destabilize your pelvic floor and shoulder girdle. Keep your deltoids stacked over your palms.

If you are flexible enough, simply allow a deeper spinal extension to create the space in your back for your body to reach the floor. This extra space will most likely come from your upper and middle back rather than your lower back, which is already stretched to a maximum in this posture. If, however, you do not have as much flexibility in your spine, then allow your chest to shift up and over your shoulders, while your head shifts back toward your wrists and away from your fingertips to come down softly. This will give your body the ability to roll like a wheel over the axles of your arms. If you move your shoulders too much when you land, you will lose the central axis of the posture and create instability instead of strength. On the exhalation, drop over into Urdhva Danurasana (see fig. 10.2).

Don't get too comfortable in Urdhva Danurasana because you will be jumping back over into Adho Mukha Vrksasana. The longer you stay down, the harder it will be to get back over. Keep your shoulders centered over your palms as much as possible. Many students try to send their chest back in the direction of their wrists, but this overextends the shoulders and creates an unstable foundation for the jump back into Adho Mukha Vrksasana.

Initiate the motion by deepening your backbend. Press firmly into your palms while reaching your head toward your feet, engage your back muscles, and accentuate the stretch along the front of your body. Firm your pelvic floor and prepare for the jump by shifting your weight onto the balls of your feet and potentially all the way onto your toes (see fig. 10.15). Inhale as you jump your chest over your shoulders, and allow your hips to follow up and back.



Figure 10.15

If you are trying this for the first time, it will be helpful to rock back and forth a few times before actually jumping. To proceed with the rocking motion, exhale as you shift your weight forward into your feet, then inhale as you shift your weight backward onto your hands and allow your heels to lift. Repeat this twice, and on the third inhalation, jump your hips over the solid foundation of your arms while allowing your knees to bend and your feet to reach toward your head. As soon as your feet lift off the ground, press as strongly as possible into your hands and shift your chest forward to carry the weight of your body over. Hold the balance as much as possible, first in Taraksvasana, then in a hollowback handstand with your legs extended, and finally in Adho Mukha Vrksasana. Exhale as you tuck your tailbone, round your lower back, and land softly back in Uttanasana. Repeat two more times.

This is a very demanding cardiovascular movement, so you can expect to be exhausted for a good while after you integrate this into your practice. The movement initiation pattern has to come from a shift in body weight over your arms. Your shoulders are ideally in alignment with your palms to distribute your weight safely into the floor. If you rock your body too far out of alignment with your wrists in Urdhva Danurasana, you will not get over into Adho Mukha Vrksasana or feel stable in the movement. Do not jump with too much force, or you risk this misalignment and may destabilize your shoulders. Instead, be patient and let the movement come over time. With the help of a qualified teacher, you will be more confident in jumping back to complete the Tic-Toc routine.

Without the help of a qualified teacher, you might consider modifying the "toc" portion of the movement by jumping back over from either Sirsasana or Pinchamayurasana. If you try this method, you will get more stability in your shoulders by rooting downward with your forearms for a wider base. Since the balance is less precarious in these two postures, it should be safer for you to try. You will also be building the same neuromuscular connections and alignment for the full Adho Mukha Vrksasana "toc." After mastering the modification, try the full pose. Remember to be patient and allow the posture to take its own time. If you push too hard or try to rush the journey, you risk injury and emotional imbalance.

BENEFITS

Builds physical endurance Builds mental focus and strength Enhances cardiovascular function Strengthens the shoulders, core, and quadriceps

HANDSTAND DROP OVER STRAIGHT LEGS

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

Of all the movements described in this advanced backbending section, this is probably the easiest and most approachable. If you have never attempted a handstand in the center of the room without assistance, learning this movement will be crucial to developing your confidence. Students working at home without the help of a qualified teacher will also benefit from this practice because it teaches them how to fall safely out of Adho Mukha Vrksasana into Urdhva Danurasana. Once you learn how to fall, you will have the confidence to try on your own.
In the shortened version of Adho Mukha Svanasana, maintain the same shoulder position as outlined for the previous pose. Inhale and jump your hips forward over the solid foundation of your arms. Keep your pelvic floor actively engaged. If possible, hold the balance in Adho Mukha Vrksasana for a few breaths to build your strength. Slowly exhale as you arch your back into a deep spinal extension. Switch your gaze from in front of and between your hands in Adho Mukha Svanasana to the front of your mat. On an exhalation, proceed to the hollowback handstand described earlier (see fig. 10.9).

Your legs will remain straight in this version and not reach for the top of your head. Hold for a few breaths to allow gravity to open your spine and hips while maintaining a firm foundation through your arms; activate and reach through your legs. After you reach your maximum spinal extension, open your legs and feet, press into your arms, keep your shoulders over your palms, and exhale as you land softly in Urdhva Danurasana, with your heels pressing firmly into the ground. Avoid dumping your weight into your feet or shifting too far away from your wrists as you land. Keep your pelvic floor engaged.

If you land with control, then it will be possible to inhale and stand immediately up from Urdhva Danurasana as soon as your feet reach the floor. Try not to walk your feet or your hands in to get a better position unless absolutely necessary. Instead of looking for the perfect position to stand up from, find stability in your landing by taking a few extra breaths to settle there before standing up. Allow the movement to flow naturally from the connection of your breath with the posture. Repeat this twice for a total of three times.

Students who are proficient in Tic-Tocs should add this movement to their daily practice, as it is a slightly different movement mechanic than Tic-Tocs and helps create length in the back and stability in the shoulders. For students who are not yet proficient in Tic-Tocs, there will be little difference between this movement and the drop over into Urdhva Danurasana in Tic-Tocs.

I started off trying this movement without any success in holding the balance of Adho Mukha Vrksasana. For a few years, I would jump up and forward and immediately land in Urdhva Danurasana. Do not stress out about doing the movement with grace and control from the beginning. Give yourself space to fall, fail, and flop around. As long as you are able to maintain the strength of your shoulder girdle and your backbend is open enough to allow you to land easily, you will be safe to try. However, if your back is stiff, you may need someone to help you drop over into Urdhva Danurasana. If you follow the traditional method and do not try Tic-Tocs until after you master Kapotasana, your back should be open enough to land safely. What is perhaps most important is that you keep a positive attitude and have faith in yourself that you will one day succeed.

TARAKSVASANA/VRSCHIKASANA II

Pose Dedicated to Taraka / Scorpion Handstand

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

The *Vamana Parana* tells the story of Kartikeya's slaying of the demon Taraka with his weapon called Shakti. The word *sva* in Sanskrit refers to the self and internal power. Taraksvasana can be said to awaken the full power of inner realization. Sometimes referred to as Vrschikasana II, this is an intense pose whose benefits include both the physical and the spiritual. Taraksvasana is also included in the Fifth Series of Ashtanga Yoga with at least two variations, but as part of the backbends in this series, only the variation with both feet touching the head is recommended.

In the shortened version of Adho Mukha Svanasana, jump or lift into Adho Mukha Vrksasana (see fig. 10.7). Find the balance through the vertical line as already described. On an exhalation, proceed to the hollowback handstand position from the Handstand Drop Over instructions (see fig. 10.9). Hold for a few breaths to allow gravity to open your spine and hips while maintaining a firm foundation through your arms and actively reaching through your legs.

From this place of balanced strength and flexibility, reaching your feet to the top of your head is about allowing your knees to bend. Keep at least the bases of your big toes touching, with your toes pointed, and allow your knees to separate slightly as your feet reach toward your head to enter Taraksvasana (see fig. 10.8).

Avoid splaying your knees too far apart, because you won't be able to maintain the inward rotation of your hip joints. Do not attempt to squeeze your hamstrings to deepen the posture. Instead, allow your back muscles to support your body, your spine to extend, and your hip joints to open. Your legs merely bend through a gentle relaxation of the effortful reach forward of your feet. If you bend your knees too rigorously in an attempt to reach your head, your hamstrings will cramp, and you will need to come out of the pose.

Keep a sense of elongation in your back, and do not compress your spine to go deeper. Engage your pelvic floor and allow a sense of spaciousness to evolve between the joints of your spine. Keep actively pressing your hands into the ground, and avoid retracting your shoulders. Reach your chest up and use the flexibility of your upper back to go deeper into the posture, much as you would in Urdhva Mukha Svanasana. If your feet do not reach your head, simply stay at your maximum extension for at least five breaths. If your feet reach your head easily, try allowing them to slide down your forehead while keeping them together and your knees close to each other.

Hold your deepest version of Taraksvasana for at least five breaths. Then exhale as you bring your feet away from your head toward the ground; drop over into Urdhva Danurasana with your heels firmly planted on the floor. Stand up immediately on the inhalation. Instead of looking for the perfect position to stand up from, find stability in the landing and initiate your movement from there.

BENEFITS

Steadies the mind Strengthens the shoulders and back Builds stamina Improves digestion

TIRIANG MUKHOTTANASANA A AND B

Intense Stretch Backbend Pose A and B

Drishti: Nasagra (Nose)

This deep backbend is one of the greatest challenges presented in the Ashtanga Yoga method. Some students will spend their entire lives working toward holding their ankles in a backbend with very little progress. Naturally flexible students will find the limit of their flexibility when moving deeper into Tiriang Mukhottanasana B. All of the same emotional, physical, and spiritual obstacles present in the backbending segment of the Intermediate Series are revisited here, sometimes with even greater intensity. Do not be surprised if attempting this pose triggers a deep emotional journey into uncertainty.

The most important thing you can remember along that inner journey is to remain calm, breathe deeply, and stick to the technique. Under no circumstances should you give in to the temptation to freak out, no matter how intense the posture may be. If you ever need to exit a deep backbend, it is crucial that you do so with the same level of inner calm and technical awareness with which you entered it.

Students with naturally flexible backs can start working on this asana as early as the point when they complete the Primary Series, if deemed appropriate by their teacher. It is appropriate for all Intermediate students to start working on this backbend after they have mastered Kapotasana. However, do not be fooled into thinking that Tiriang Mukhottanasana is all about flexibility. If you do not maintain the strength of the posture by activating your legs, pelvic floor, and core muscles, the posture will not be safe, regardless of how naturally flexible you are. In fact, students with natural flexibility should take extra care to emphasize the strength elements of Tiriang Mukhottanasana. If you are able to walk your hands in toward your heels in Urdhva Danurasana, keep your heels firmly planted on the ground, and breathe deeply, then you are ready to attempt Tiriang Mukhottanasana (see fig. 10.16).



Figure 10.16

If you can walk your hands in toward your heels, it is crucial that you maintain an equal distribution of weight between your hands and feet and press your heels firmly into the ground. Lifting your heels or taking all of your weight in your hands will create an inefficient neuromuscular pattern that may result in injury or instability when you attempt Tiriang Mukhottanasana. It is better to create the space to deepen your backbend by elongating the front of your body while engaging your core, legs, and back for support.

If you notice that your heels lift as you walk in toward your feet, you are probably compensating for a lack of spinal extension. Rather than give yourself the false idea that you are deeper into the pose than you really are, it is better to simply stay in the deepest version of Urdhva Danurasana that you can safely maintain and release your attachment to go deeper. When your back is stronger, it will open naturally.

During the process of opening, it is essential that you train your body in movement mechanics that have the potential to keep you safe as you go deeper. It is also important to note that your backbend will most likely fluctuate every day, and you have to remain open to that ebb and flow. There will be days when Tiriang Mukhottanasana may seem easy, and other days when it will seem impossible. Do not force yourself to reach your deepest backbend every day. Listen to your body and follow the signs it gives you about when to go deeper.

The first way to attempt Tiriang Mukhottanasana is from the deepest version of Urdhva Danurasana that you can safely do. The closer your hands are to your feet, the easier it will be. However, it is more important to feel the foundation of your legs than it is to walk your hands in too close.

Working with the assistance of a qualified teacher is necessary for most students to attempt Tiriang Mukhottanasana. The teacher will support your pelvis and keep your weight shifted forward over your feet. To help your teacher, press strongly into your heels, send your hips forward, and start to transfer your weight into your feet. To catch your ankles, your weight needs to shift off of your hands and into your legs and core. Lean a little into your left hand to free up the space in your right shoulder as you inhale and allow your right hand to take hold of your ankle on the exhalation. Do not overactivate your right arm or shoulder during the assist. Focus on surrendering the movement of your shoulder to your teacher's guidance and work on the strength in your foundation of hips, core, and legs.

Keep your right shoulder externally rotated, and wrap your right elbow toward your right ear as you reach for your ankle. Do not rely solely on your shoulder flexibility. Allow your backbend to deepen as your hand reaches toward your ankle. Once your fingers are wrapped tightly around the ankle, then activate your right shoulder, arm, and fingers. Grip your fingertips around your ankle; stabilize the posture and the contact between your fingers and your ankle.

Next, shift your weight even more into your heels while sending your pelvis forward. Your teacher will be supporting your weight as much as possible, but do not let him or her do all the work. Inhale as you prepare both mentally and physically by shifting your body weight into your legs and core. Come up onto your left fingertips, if possible, to shift your weight farther forward. Exhale as you allow your teacher to lift your left hand off the floor and guide it to your left ankle. Follow the same movement pattern with your left shoulder as you did with your right, allowing the external rotation of your left shoulder to keep your elbow pulled in toward your left ear.

Once your fingers are wrapped around your left ankle, strengthen your grip. Then pull your chest toward the backs of your knees with both hands.

Gaze down toward the floor between your toes for balance, but eventually return your gaze to your nose (see fig. 10.10).

Engage your pelvic floor, press your hips as far forward as possible, and continue to create space in your spine. Keep your heels firmly rooted while allowing your sacrum to nutate even more. Think about creating space on the inhalation and using that space to go deeper on the exhalation by gently engaging your back muscles and pressing your legs firmly into the ground. Do not compress your spine, but create space to facilitate the deepening motion. Find a place of inner peace while breathing calmly.

If you successfully find the balance, your teacher will release his or her support, and you will stand on your own in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A. After five breaths, inhale and return to standing. When you release your hands, keep the engagement and support of your muscles all the way to standing, just as you do when you stand up from Urdhva Danurasana.

Standing on your own in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A is one of the benchmarks for your readiness to start the even more arduous Third Series of Ashtanga Yoga. As such, students at the end of the Intermediate Series should definitely work on this movement. If you succeed in standing on your own in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A when trying the movement from the floor with the help of a teacher, you may be able to try it on your own without assistance.

If you feel stable enough to attempt this, be sure your legs and heels remain firmly planted throughout your attempt. When you are ready, walk your hands in to your heels just as you would with your teacher present. Instead of waiting for your right hand to be guided into place, lean your weight into your heels and onto your left hand. Come up onto the fingertips of your right hand, and crawl them toward the outside of your right foot, just as you would in Kapotasana from the floor. When you pass your anklebone, crawl your fingers up your foot while pressing your weight strongly into your heels. If you feel that your legs are supporting your body weight, then repeat the same motion with your left hand. Coming up onto your fingertips helps transfer your weight forward while you try to catch your ankles (see fig. 10.4).

Breathe freely throughout your attempt. Keep your shoulders rotated outward and your elbows close to your ears while crawling forward. Avoid bending your elbows too much or placing them on the floor. Since your arms are still bearing your weight, it is important that you maintain the alignment in your shoulders to prevent injury. If you are able to grab your ankles but cannot keep the balance, then try holding only your right ankle for five breaths and then releasing. Hold only your left ankle for another five breaths and release. One day you will feel the balance shift into your legs, and you will be able to hold both ankles on your own.

Note that it does not matter whether you start with the right or left hand when you are working on holding your ankles. However, if you notice that you always favor one side, it may be useful to switch sides and favor the other for a little while to create balance in your flexibility.

Once you are able to hold this starting with your hands on the floor, you may be ready to start from a standing position. Get the assistance of a qualified teacher the first time you try this. Inhale to create space and begin dropping over as though you are entering Urdhva Danurasana. Exhale as you bend backward and send your hips forward, press firmly into your heels, engage your pelvic floor, and lift your spine. Allow your arms to release as though you are aiming toward the floor, but do not go down (see fig. 10.6).

If you feel stable, gently bend your right elbow while keeping your right shoulder externally rotated, and wrap the elbow toward your right ear. Do not wing your right elbow outward. Lean your weight a little to the right, but do not twist your spine too much. Exhale as you allow your teacher to guide your right arm toward your ankle by deepening your backbend and strengthening your foundation.

If you feel your heels lifting or any crunching in your back, stop immediately and do not go any further.

After you catch your right ankle, inhale to create more space while pressing into your foundation. Lean left slightly and exhale as you allow your teacher to guide your left arm toward your left ankle. Keep your left shoulder externally rotated. When you have a firm grasp on both ankles, pull equally with both hands to find your center line. Reach your head toward the backs of your calves, bend your elbows, and pull with your hands (see fig. 10.10). Finally, straighten your legs as much as possible. Take five breaths, then return to standing while maintaining the structural integrity of your inner body.

Building a trusting relationship with your teacher is essential for integrating this deep assist into your daily practice.

If that was easy for you, you may be ready to catch your ankles directly on your own without your teacher. If you can see your ankles while hanging over in the preparation, it is a good indication that you can reach them on your own. Starting off in the same free-hanging position already described, lean your body slightly to the right and exhale as you reach for your right ankle (see fig. 10.6). Do your best to avoid letting your shoulder wing out to the side while you reach. This movement is not as dangerous as when you try to do it from the floor, because here your arms are not bearing your weight, but it is best to establish correct movement mechanics in any version of a posture. When reaching your right hand toward your right ankle, exhale as you bend into the space between your vertebrae. Surrender to the emptiness deep within your inner body while keeping your foundation firm and stable. If you succeed in catching your right ankle, inhale and create more space by sending your hips up and forward and rooting into your foundation.

Next, lean left, press your hips farther forward, strengthen your legs, and exhale as you reach for your left ankle. Do not rely on your shoulder for all the flexibility for this movement. Deepen your backbend to enter Tiriang Mukhottanasana A. Just as in the attempt from the ground, if you can catch one ankle but not the other, you can stay for five breaths on each side, and slowly over time you will catch both on your own. Once you are holding your ankles, take five breaths, then inhale as you return to standing.

Only students who are comfortable in the second version of Tiriang Mukhottanasana A where they catch their ankles directly from the air without touching the floor should even consider deepening this already intense backbend. Usually your teacher will move you into Tiriang Mukhottanasana B (see fig. 10.11) gradually as your body opens and strengthens. Do not go straight for this posture. Start off in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A, following the instructions given here, and then allow your teacher to walk your fingers slowly up from your ankle to your lower shin, one hand at a time.

When moving up from your ankles along your shins, it is crucial that you thrust your pelvis forward while straightening your legs. Do not straighten your arms; bend your elbows, wrap your fingers around your shins, and pull your chest toward the backs of your knees. If you can comfortably hold on to your shins, your teacher may walk your hands up slowly toward your knees. Again, having a trusting relationship with your teacher is vital when moving into Tiriang Mukhottanasana B.

Once you are holding your shins in your deepest backbend, take five breaths and then return to standing. Some proficient, flexible students can go directly into Tiriang Mukhottanasana B from the free-hanging backbend preparatory position with the help of a teacher. This is something to be worked toward gradually over time. Straightening your legs is mandatory after catching your upper shins. If you cannot straighten your legs, you should not proceed any further, because this indicates either a lack of firm grounding or a tightness in your hip flexors that could lead to an injury if pushed too hard too soon.

Students who could easily grab their ankles on their own in Tiriang Mukhottanasana A can also try to walk their own hands up their shins and reach for their knees. If doing this on your own, do not release your hold on your ankles, but spider-walk your fingers up your shins to maintain the strength and stability of the posture. Walk up one side and then the other while breathing freely. Create the intervertebral space you need by deepening your spinal extension, and then use that space to move your hands up toward your knees. While it is possible for some students to grab their knees directly in Tiriang Mukhottanasana B, be careful not to wing your shoulders out too far as you reach toward your knees. As with grabbing your ankles, if you can see the backs of your calves, you may be able to reach directly for the deepest grip. Once you have this grip, take five breaths and then return to standing.

While this probably sounds like a circus trick to most people, it is a deep backbend that with regular practice is attainable by more students than you might think.

When you reach this depth of practice, the energy that flows through your nervous system is supercharged. If you succeeded at any of these variations of Tiriang Mukhottanasana, take a moment to congratulate yourself. This is one of the deepest backbends in the Ashtanga Yoga method, and it tests your strength and flexibility like few other postures. Regular practice of Tiriang Mukhottanasana will increase your mental concentration, heighten energy flow throughout the day, and improve your digestion and elimination processes. Deep backbends also help balance the emotions, stimulate the rise of spiritual energy up the central column of the body, and create a meditative sense of peace.

The first time you succeed in Tiriang Mukhottanasana, either on your own or with a teacher, it will accelerate the inner work of your practice. You will feel a magnified version of all the benefits of deep backbends. Expect to be sore through your legs and perhaps also your back muscles the day after your first deep Tiriang Mukhottanasana. It is important that you practice again the next day, even if you only do gentle backbends. Gradually, you will be able to practice Tiriang Mukhottanasana every day.

BENEFITS

Increases energy flow Stimulates the sushumna nadi Improves digestion and elimination Strengthens the legs, pelvic floor, and back Stretches the front of the body and shoulders Creates emotional balance

PASCHIMATTANASANA

Intense Forward Fold

Drishti: Padangustha (Toes)

Paschima means "west" or "hinder," and refers to the backside of the body, and *uttana* means "intense stretch," so a more literal translation of this pose name would be "Intense West Stretch." However, the posture is usually is referred to as "Seated Forward Bend" in English.

After returning to standing from Tiriang Mukhottanasana, you may sit down directly for Paschimattanasana (see fig. 10.12). However, the most traditional exit would be to start the vinyasa for Paschimattanasana directly from standing. After a very deep backbend, the traditional vinyasa can help stabilize your spine, so while it might seem like extra work, it can be a helpful transition from deep backbends into the forward fold counterstretch.

To do this, inhale and raise your arms over your head, then exhale and fold forward. Inhale and look up, then exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale, jump through your arms, straighten your legs, and sit down. Wrap your hands around your feet, inhale again to create space in your abdomen while firming your pelvic floor, and draw your lower belly deep inside (see fig. 10.17). Exhale and enter Paschimattanasana (see fig. 10.12). Stay in this pose for ten deep breaths while maintaining healthy forward bending principles.

Do not release everything and just quit. Keep your pelvic floor firm to support your back muscles, and rotate your thighs inward. Avoid rounding your back, and use this time to release your back muscles and facilitate a counteraction to the deep work of Intermediate Series backbends. During these ten breaths, mark the transition into the closing postures and release the energy you have worked up in both the intensive backbends and the rest of the Intermediate Series. Some emotions may begin to surface as you delve deep into your emotional body. Should you feel any intense emotions, either positive or negative, simply observe them for what they are without generating attachment or judgment.



Figure 10.17

The benefits and a more detailed explanation of Paschimattanasana can be found in *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga*.

When you are ready to exit the posture, inhale again to straighten your arms and lift your torso (see fig. 10.17). Exhale to settle into this position, and firm your pelvic floor. Inhale as you cross your feet and lift off the ground. Exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale and jump through to a prone position. Prepare for the closing postures by lying down with your heels close together and your hands by your hips (see fig. 10.18). Take a few breaths to mark the transition between the deep work of the Intermediate Series and the integrative work of the closing postures.



Figure 10.18

Closing Postures

THE CLOSING POSTURES OF THE ASHTANGA YOGA METHOD will seem like old friends because they have been part of your integrated daily practice since the Primary Series. Their focus on the subtle flow of energy through your inner body while deepening your breath makes their continued practice useful. Taking the time to practice the closing postures properly will help your body integrate the deep lessons of the Intermediate Series. The longer hold times for the inversions in these postures create structural stability in your spine and help equalize the energy stimulated by intense backbends.

Just as with any series of poses that is done repeatedly, it is important to remain curious and open-minded about your body and your practice. Do not do the closing postures in a mindless way; they must be fresh and new each time. If you take these postures for granted, you will not get their full benefit. Intermediate students should focus on activating the bandhas, deepening the breath, and turning the mind to the subtle body so that the closing postures eventually become meditative and calming.

A step-by-step breakdown of the poses is provided in *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga*, so they are presented only in an abbreviated format in this chapter. By this point in your practice, you should be well versed in their order and execution.

Aim to hold Salamba Sarvangasana for at least fifteen breaths. If you have done particularly deep work during your practice session, hold the pose (see fig. 11.1) for up to thirty breaths to help your nervous system regain its sense of balance. You should hold the remaining postures from the Salamba Sarvangasana sequence (see figs. 11.1 through 11.7) for eight breaths each. Do not rush through this sequence. Lifting your sit bones and pivoting from your hip joints in Halasana (see fig. 11.2) and Urdhva Padmasana (see fig. 11.4) will help you go deeper in Tittibhasana. Rounding your back and spiraling inward toward a deep spinal flexion in Karnapidasana (Ear Pressure Pose; see fig. 11.3) and Pindasana (Embryo Pose; see fig. 11.5) will help build your core strength and the spinal position necessary for dynamic strength postures like Karandavasana. These two poses also help you release the quadratus lumborum muscles, which is crucial for placing your legs behind your head. Matysasana (Fish Pose; see fig. 11.6) and Uttana Padasana (Extended-Foot Pose; see fig. 11.7) take your spine into a gentle arch and help relieve any lower back pain caused from pushing too hard in backbends. Immediately after your last breath in Uttana Padasana (see fig. 11.8). In the Primary Series, many students don't do this vinyasa properly and simply lie down flat with their legs outstretched before attempting Chakrasana. Keeping your body connected throughout the Salamba Sarvangasana sequence and through the vinyasa is important to establish consistency in both your physical and your internal practice.



Figure 11.1

Try to extend your practice of Sirsasana in this sequence (see fig. 11.9). Traditional yoga texts indicate that the benefits of this pose start to accrue after a minimum of three minutes. Holding Sirsasana for extended periods requires your mind to be in a meditative flow rather than focused on exterior muscles or results. Fifty breaths in Sirsasana is an ideal count for the Intermediate Series. When holding Sirsasana for prolonged periods, you will be challenged to use a combination of physical strength and good alignment. Maintain the strong foundation in your shoulder girdle while activating your core. Keep your legs firmly reaching up and toward each other. Point your toes throughout the movement and gaze at your nose. Focusing on deepening your breath will bring your mind toward internal awareness of the subtle body. Use the time in Sirsasana to cultivate a meditative mind.



Figure 11.2



Figure 11.3



Figure 11.4



Figure 11.5



Figure 11.6



Figure 11.7



Figure 11.8

Regardless of how long you hold Sirsasana, ten breaths in Ardha Sirsasana (Half Headstand; see fig. 11.10) are sufficient. It is best to think of Ardha Sirsasana as a core strengthener. Activate your abs and pull your thighs together while sending your hips backward. Finding your connection to your core here will help you lower down smoothly in Karandavasana.

If you have a stable Sirsasana and are trying to build strength for postures like Pinchamayurasana, you may try Urdhva Sirsasana (Lifted Headstand; see fig. 11.11). While this pose is not required, it can help build strength and is recommended for students who have completed the Intermediate Series, including the seven headstands. If you struggle in inversions, this is a safe way to practice developing the sense of balance and spatial orientation necessary for your practice. The process of lifting your head off the ground mirrors the reascent in Karandavasana. If you attempt to lift your head from a spinal extension, you will find you have no strength. Round your head under and press your chest back while lifting your legs up and forward. Use your core strength to lift your body while pressing up with the firmness of your shoulders.



Figure 11.9



Figure 11.10



Figure 11.11



Figure 11.12

After ten breaths in Urdhva Sirsasana, exhale and gently place your head on the ground. Continuing that same exhalation, come all the way down and rest in Balasana for at least five breaths (see fig. 11.12). If you held Sirsasana for close to fifty breaths, you may need ten breaths or more in Balasana to let the blood equalize in your body. Do not skip or rush through this simple asana. Allow your mind to focus inward and remain calmly attentive to your breath.

The last three postures of every Ashtanga Yoga practice are Yoga Mudra (see fig. 11.13), Padmasana (see fig. 11.14), and Utplutih (Sprung-Up Pose; see fig. 11.15). Elongate your inhalations and exhalations while holding these three poses, moving toward a full ten-second inhalation and ten-second

exhalation for each. These postures serve as a preparation for pranayama practice. It is also a good idea to hold the final strength posture, Utplutih, for at least twenty breaths.



Figure 11.13



Figure 11.14



Figure 11.15

No matter how long you practice the Ashtanga Yoga method, Utplutih is a happy moment in the practice, because it signals the completion of your yoga journey for the day. While it may be tempting to skip this final pose, the intensive activation of Utplutih helps your mind and body relax completely for the resting posture.



Figure 11.16

After ten to twenty breaths in Utplutih, exhale and jump directly back to Chaturanga Dandasana. For a more detailed explanation on how to jump back from Padmasana, consult *The Power of Ashtanga Yoga*. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale and jump forward to Sapta (see fig. 11.16), then exhale and fold forward into Astau (see fig. 11.17). Inhale and return directly to Samsthiti without taking your arms over your head (see fig. 11.18).



Figure 11.17



Figure 11.18

Stand here and chant the closing prayer (see Chaper 2). Once you are finished with the prayer, inhale and raise your arms in the manner following Surya Namaskara A; exhale and fold forward; inhale and look up; then exhale and jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana. Inhale and roll forward to Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, then exhale and roll back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Inhale, jump through your arms, lie down, and rest in Sukhasana (Easy Pose; see fig. 11.19). Stay in this final pose for a minimum of five minutes and a maximum of fifteen minutes. Relax all effort, release the bandhas, and allow your breath to be natural. Keep your mind open to a feeling of joy and happiness that may wash over you like a gentle wave emanating from your heart center. When you are ready, return to any comfortable seated posture. Take a few moments here to cherish the meditative calm in both body and mind, allowing the yogi's peaceful disposition to transform every breath. Allow your heart to be brave, strong, and open in both your practice and your life.



Figure 11.19



Sarvangasana Minimum ten breaths



Halasana Eight breaths



Karnapidasana Eight breaths



Urdhva Padmasana Eight breaths



Pindasana Eight breaths



Matysasana Eight breaths



Uttana Padasana Eight breaths



Sirsasana Minimum fifteen breaths



Ardha Sirsasana Ten breaths



Urdhva Sirsasana Ten breaths



Balasana Five breaths



Yoga Mudra Ten breaths



Padmasana Ten breaths



Utplutih Ten breaths



Sukhasana Five to ten minutes
APPENDIX A

Intermediate Series



Pāśāsana



Krouncāsana



Śalabhāsana A



Śalabhāsana B



Bhekāsana



Dhanurāsana



Pārśva Dhanurāsana



Uṣṭrāsana



Laghu Vajrāsana



Kapotāsana A



Kapotāsana B



Supta Vajrāsana



Bakāsana A



Bakāsana B



Bharadvājāsana



Ardha Matsyendrāsana



Eka-Pāda Śīrṣāsana A



Eka-Pāda Śīrṣāsana B



Dvi Pāda Śīrṣāsana A



Dvi Pāda Śīrṣāsana B



Yoganidrāsana



Tițțibhāsana A



Tițțibhāsana B



Tițțibhāsana C



Tițțibhāsana D



Pinca Mayūrāsana



Karāndāvāsana



Mayūrāsana



Nakrāsana



Vātāyanāsana



Parighāsana



Gomukhāsana A



Gomukhāsana B



Supta Ūrdhva Pāda Vajrāsana



Mukta Hasta Śīrṣāsana A



Mukta Hasta Śīrṣāsana B



Mukta Hasta Śīrṣāsana C



Baddha Hasta Śīr<u>ṣ</u>āsana A



Baddha Hasta Śīrṣāsana B



Baddha Hasta Śīrṣāsana C



Baddha Hasta Śīrṣāsana D

APPENDIX B

Intermediate Series

Vinyasa Count

PĀŚĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump forward
	Exhale, twist left
Așțau	Twist right
Nava	Inhale, lift up
Daśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

KROUNCĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, bind hands around left foot,
	straight arms
Așțau	Exhale, chin to shin
Nava	Inhale, straight arms
	Exhale

Daśa	Inhale, lift up
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Inhale, jump through, bind hands around right foot, straight arms
Pañcadaśa	Exhale, chin to shin
Şoḍaśa	Inhale, straight arms Exhale
Saptadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekunavimśatiķ	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Vimśatiḥ	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

ŚALABHĀSANA

Catvāri	Hold, exhale, lower
Pañca	Inhale, position A position, five breaths
Şaț	Inhale, position B, five breaths
Sapta	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Așțau	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

BHEKĀSANA

Catvāri	Hold, exhale, lower
Pañca	Inhale, take position, five breaths
Şaț	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

DHANURĀSANA

Catvāri Hold, exhale, lower

Pañca	Inhale, take position, five breaths
Şaț	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

PĀRŚVA DHANURĀSANA

Hold, exhale, lower
Inhale, take position, lift up, one breath
Exhale, go right, five breaths
Inhale, come up
Exhale, go left, five breaths
Inhale, come up, five breaths
Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

UṢṬRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump forward, hold waist Exhale, engage the pelvic floor Inhale, prepare by lifting the spine away from the pelvis
Așțau	Exhale, hold heels to enter posture, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, come up, hold waist, exhale
Daśa	Inhale, lift up
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

LAGHU VAJRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump forward, hold waist
	Exhale, engage the pelvic floor

	Inhale, prepare by lifting the spine away from the pelvis
Așțau	Exhale, hold ankles, go back to position, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, come up, hold waist Exhale
Daśa	Inhale, lift up
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

KAPOTĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump forward, hold waist Exhale, engage the pelvic floor
	Inhale, prepare by lifting the spine away from the pelvis
Așțau	Exhale, catch heels, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, straight arms, five breaths
Daśa	Inhale, come up, hold waist Exhale
Ekādaśa	Inhale, lift up
Duādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Trayodaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

SUPTA VAJRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Așțau	Padmasana
Nava	Exhale, place your head down, five breaths
	Go up and down three times
	Stay down, five breaths

Daśa	Inhale, bring your head back up and return to Baddha Padmasana Exhale, engage the pelvic floor, release your feet
Ekādaśa	Inhale, lift your Padmasana up
Duādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Trayodaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BAKĀSANA A

Inhale, jump forward to squat, prepare
Inhale, lift up
Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BAKĀSANA B

Sapta	Inhale, jump to position
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BHARADVĀJĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Așțau	Take position right side, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, lift up
Daśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

Trayodaśa	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Caturdaśa	Take position left side, five breaths
Pañcadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Şoḍaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Saptadaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

ARDHA MATSYENDRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Așțau	Take position right side, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, lift up
Daśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Caturdaśa	Take position left side, five breaths
Pañcadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Şoḍaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Saptadaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

EKA-PĀDA ŚĪRṢĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump around right side
Așțau	Exhale, fold forward, hold wrist, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, come up, prayer hands
	Exhale
Daśa	Inhale, lift up, chin to shin
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Inhale, jump around left side
Pañcadaśa	Exhale, fold forward, five breaths
Şoḍaśa	Inhale, come up, prayer hands Exhale
Saptadaśa	Inhale, lift up, chin to shin
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekunavimśatiķ	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Vimśatiḥ	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

DVI PĀDA ŚĪRṢĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump legs around, legs behind head, five breaths
Așțau	Inhale, lift up, five breaths
Nava	Bakasana
Daśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

YOGANIDRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, lie down
Așțau	Legs behind head, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, Chakrasana, land in Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

TIŢŢIBHĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, Tittibhasana A, five breaths
Așțau	Tittibhasana B, bind hands around back, straight legs, five breaths

Nava	Walk forward five times, walk back five times
Daśa	Fingers around ankles, five breaths
Daśa	Inhale, lift up, Tittibhasana A
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Bakasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Trayodaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

PINCA MAYŪRĀSANA

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up, five breaths
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

KARĀNDĀVĀSANA

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Lift up, Pinchamayurasana
Nava	Padmasana, lower, five breaths
Daśa	Inhale, lift up, hold, don't jump back
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Inhale, jump forward, stand up, look up
Pañcadaśa	Exhale, fold forward
	Inhale, return to standing
	Samsthiti

MAYŪRĀSANA

Ekam	Feet hip-width apart, fold forward, open feet, flip hands/wrists, look up
Dve	Fold forward, head between arms
Trīņi	Inhale, look up
Catvāri	Jump back
Pañca	Inhale, take position, five breaths
Şaț	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Așțau	Inhale, jump forward, look up
Nava	Exhale, fold forward, head between arms Inhale, Samsthiti

NAKRĀSANA

Ekam	Inhale, lift arms, look up
Dve	Exhale, fold forward
Trīņi	Inhale, look up
Catvāri	Jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana, hold
Pañca	Jump forward five times, backward five times
Şaț	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Așțau	Inhale, jump forward, stand up, look up
Nava	Exhale, fold forward Inhale, Samsthiti

VĀTĀYANĀSANA

Ekam	Inhale, fold right leg into half-lotus, bind foot with hand
Dve	Exhale, fold forward, hands on floor
Trīņi	Inhale, look up
Catvāri	Exhale, jump back, lotus foot off floor
Pañca	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

Şaț	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Inhale, jump forward, take position right side, five
	breaths
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, jump forward, take position left side, five
	breaths
Trayodaśa	Inhale, lift up
Caturdaśa	Exhale, jump back
Pañcadaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Şoḍaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Saptadaśa	Inhale, jump forward, look up, bind left foot with hand
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, fold foward
Ekunavimśatiķ	Inhale, look up
Vimśatiḥ	Exhale, stand up
	Inhale, Samsthiti

PARIGHĀSANA

Ekam	Inhale, lift arms, look up
Dve	Exhale, fold forward
Trīņi	Inhale, look up
Catvāri	Jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Pañca	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Şaț	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Sapta	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit
Așțau	Inhale, hands to waist
	Exhale to posture, bend right knee, lean left
Nava	Inhale, hands to waist
	Exhale

Daśa	Inhale, lift up
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Inhale, jump through, straight legs Exhale
Pañcadaśa	Inhale, hands to waist
	Exhale into posture, bend left, lean right
Şoḍaśa	Inhale, hands to waist
	Exhale
Saptadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekunavimśatiķ	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Vimśatiķ	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

GOMUKHĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit Take position right side, five breaths
Așțau	Lift arms, five breaths
Nava	Inhale, lift up
Daśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Duādaśa	Exhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Inhale, jump through, straight legs, sit Take position left side, five breaths
Caturdaśa	Lift arms, five breaths
Pañcadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Şoḍaśa	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Saptadaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

SUPTA ŪRDHVA PĀDA VAJRĀSANA

Sapta	Inhale, jump through, lie down
Așțau	Lift legs, right half-lotus, bind foot to hand
	Exhale
Nava	Inhale, roll up, twist right, five breaths
Daśa	Inhale, lift up
Ekādaśa	Exhale, jump back
Duādaśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Trayodaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana
Caturdaśa	Inhale, jump through, lie down
Pañcadaśa	Lift legs, left half-lotus, bind foot to hand
	Exhale
Şoḍaśa	Inhale, roll up, twist left, hold for five breaths
Saptadaśa	Inhale, lift up
Așțaudaśa	Exhale, jump back to Chaturanga Dandasana
Ekunavimśatiķ	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Vimśatiḥ	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

MUKTA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA A

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

MUKTA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA B

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana

Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

MUKTA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA C

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BADDHA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA A

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BADDHA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA B

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BADDHA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA C

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana

Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

BADDHA HASTA ŚĪRṢĀSANA D

Sapta	Prepare
Așțau	Inhale, lift up
Nava	Exhale, jump back, Chaturanga Dandasana
Daśa	Inhale, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana
Ekādaśa	Exhale, Adho Mukha Svanasana

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