

VRIKSHASANA (TREE POSE)

It replicates the graceful, steady stance of a tree. Unlike most yoga poses, the tree pose requires keeping our eyes open in order to maintain body balance.



STEPS:

- Stand tall and straight with arms by the side of your body.
- Bend your right knee and place the right foot high up on your left thigh. The sole of the foot should be placed flat and firmly near the foot of the thigh.
- Make sure that your left leg is straight. Find your balance.
- Once you are well balanced, take a deep breath in, gracefully raise your arms over your head from the side, and bring your palms together in 'Namaste' mudra.
- Look straight ahead in front of you, at a distant object. A steady gaze helps maintain a steady balance.
- With slow exhalation gently bring down your hands from the sides.
- Release your right leg firmly on mat.

- Repeat same with other leg.

BENEFITS :

- It stretches the legs, back and arms.
- It brings balance to your body and mind.
- It relieves sciatica pain
- It improves focus and concentration.

CONTRADICTIONS:

- Avoid this posture if you are suffering from migraine, insomnia.
- Avoid in High and low blood pressure.
- Avoid raising your hands overhead in case of High B.P also in case of vertigo.

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GARUDASANA (EAGLE POSE)



INSTRUCTIONS:

- ☐ Stand in Tadasana.
- ☐ Exhale, Squat a little, inhale, lift the right leg up and wrap it around the left.
- ☐ Place the right hand in front, take the left hand from below and wrap around the right hand, palms closer and touching each other.
- ☐ Keep your spine straight, gaze at a point.
- ☐ Hold the posture for a while with normal breath.
- ☐ Release the right leg, relax the hands and stand in Tadasana.
- ☐ Repeat on the other side.

BENEFITS OF GARUDASANA:

- ☐ Improves concentration.
- ☐ Strengthens muscles and loosens up joints of shoulders, arms and legs.

CONTRAINDICATION OF GARUDASANA:

- ☐ People with knee, ankle and shoulder injury must avoid.

UTTHITA TRIKONASANA (Extended Triangle Pose)

It is a foundation triangle pose that's performed in different styles of yoga.



STEPS:

- ☐ Engage your right thigh muscles and draw your right femur into its socket. Extend your right hand towards the front of the room, keeping your right hip tucked
- ☐ Lower your right hand down onto your shin or ankle. And take your palm beside of your right foot on the mat and hold this pose.
- ☐ The left shoulder stacks on top of the right one as you open your chest, reaching your left fingertips towards the ceiling.
- ☐ Turn your head to take your gaze up towards your left fingertips.
- ☐ Continue to draw your right thigh muscles upward, deepening the crease in your right hip.
- ☐ Soften your right knee slightly to prevent hyperextension.
- ☐ Stay for at least for 5 breaths.
- ☐ Repeat this pose with the left leg.

BENEFITS:

- ☐ Strengthens the legs and stretches the groin, hamstrings and hips.
- ☐ It opens the chest muscles and shoulders.
- ☐ It improves balance and stability.

CONTRADICTIONS:

Avoid this pose if you have an injury to your back and neck, hips or shoulders. You may wish to avoid it if you have headache or migraine.

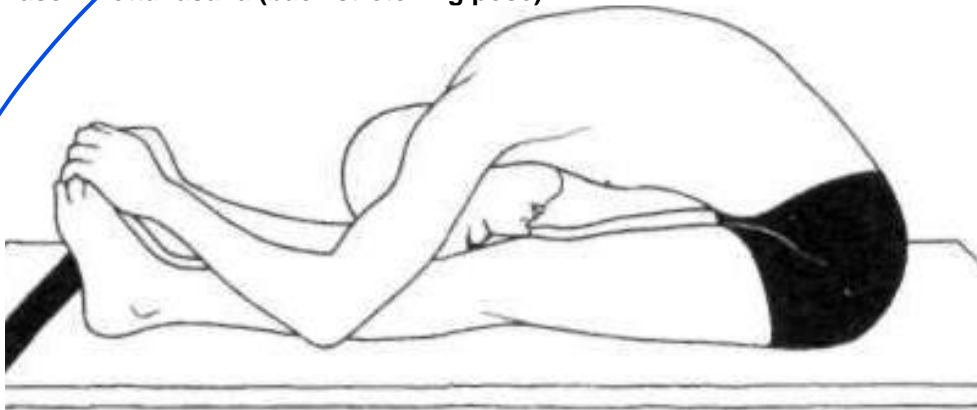
PADAHASTASANA (HANDS TO THE FEET POSE)



INSTRUCTIONS:

- Stand in Tadasana.
- Inhale and raise your hands up over the head.
- Exhale and bend forward keeping your hands and back in one line, without bending your knees or hunching the back.
- Try to place the abdomen, chest close to the thigh and knees, placing your palms beside the feet.
- After a few breaths, breathe inhale and rise up, relax hands.

Paschimottanasana (back stretching pose)



Sit on the floor with the legs outstretched, feet together and hands on the knees. This is the starting position.

Relax the whole body.

Slowly bend forward from the hips, sliding the hands down the legs. Try to grasp the big toes with the fingers and thumbs. If this is impossible, hold the heels, ankles or any part of the legs that can be reached comfortably.

Move slowly without forcing or jerking.

Hold the position for a few seconds. Relax the back and leg muscles allowing them to gently stretch.

Keeping the legs straight and utilising the arm muscles, not the back muscles, begin to bend the elbows and gently bring the trunk down towards the legs, maintaining a firm

grip on the toes, feet or legs.

Try to touch the knees with the forehead. Do not strain.

This is the final position.

Hold the position for as long as is comfortable and relax.

Slowly return to the starting position.

This is one round.

Breathing: Inhale in the starting position.

Exhale slowly while bending forward.

Inhale in the static position.

Exhale while bringing the trunk further towards the legs with the arms.

Breathe slowly and deeply in the final position or retain the breath out if holding for a short duration.

Inhale while returning to the starting position.

Duration: Beginners should perform up to 5 rounds, staying in the final position for only a short length of time. Adepts may maintain the final position for up to 5 minutes.

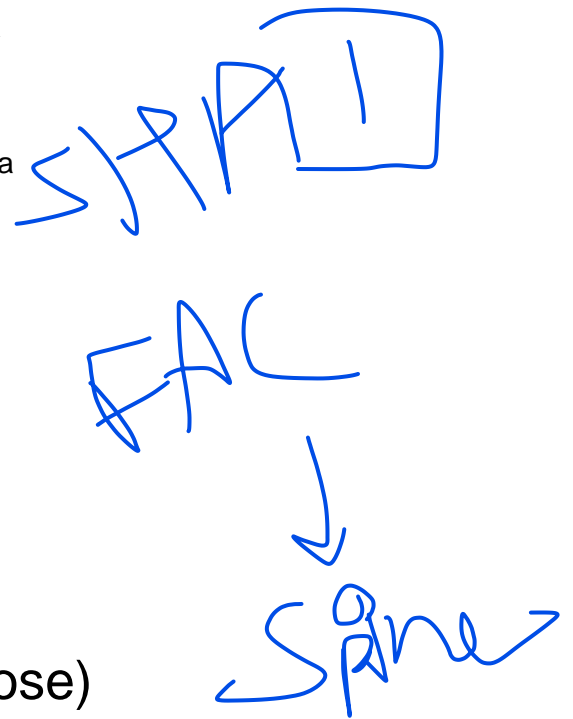
Awareness: Physical - on the abdomen, relaxation of the back muscles or the slow breathing process.

Spiritual - on swadhisthana chakra.

Sequence: This asana should precede or follow backward bending asanas such as setuasana, chakrasana, bhujangasana or matsyasana.

Contra-indications: People who suffer from slipped disc or sciatica should not practise paschimottanasana.

Benefits: This asana stretches the hamstring muscles and increases flexibility in the hip joints. It tones and massages the entire abdominal and pelvic region including the liver, pancreas, spleen, kidneys and adrenal glands. It removes excess weight in this area and helps alleviate disorders of the uro-genital system. It stimulates circulation to the nerves and muscles of the spine. It is used in yoga therapy for the management of prolapse, menstrual disorders, sluggish liver, diabetes, colitis, kidney complaints, bronchitis and eosinophilia.



Meditation Asanas (5 meditative pose)

The main purpose of the meditation asanas is to allow the practitioner to sit for extended periods of time without moving the body and without discomfort. Only when the body has been steady and still for some time will meditation be experienced. Deep meditation requires the spinal column to be straight and very few asanas can satisfy this condition.

Furthermore, in high stages of meditation the practitioner loses control over the muscles of the body. The meditation asana, therefore, needs to hold the body in a steady position without conscious effort. Why not lie in shavasana, then, for meditation since it satisfies all the requirements? Because in shavasana there is a tendency to drift into sleep. It is essential to remain awake and alert while going through the various

stages which lead to successful meditation.

Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh said the following about asanas and meditation: "You must be able to sit in one of the meditation asanas for a full three hours at a stretch without the body shaking. Then only will you gain true *asana siddhi*, mastery over the asana, and be able to practise the higher stages of pranayama and dhyana. Without securing a steady asana you cannot progress well in meditation. The more steady you are in your asana, the more you will be able to concentrate with a one-pointed mind. If you can be steady in a posture even for one hour, you will be able to acquire a one-pointed mind and feel the *atmic anandam*, infinite peace and soulful bliss inside you."

Precautions: If there is severe discomfort or pain in the legs after sitting for some time in a meditation asana, slowly unlock the legs and massage them. When the blood circulation has returned to normal and there is no pain, resume the asana. However, be aware that the knee is a very delicate and much abused joint of the body and be careful not to strain it, especially while moving into or out of these meditation asanas. Do not on any account use undue force or strain to sit in a meditation asana.

Right or left leg: In all the asanas discussed in this chapter, either the left or the right leg may be placed uppermost. It is a matter of personal preference and depends on whichever is the more comfortable. Ideally, the leg position should be alternated so that the balance on both sides of the body is maintained.

Practice note: A useful suggestion to make the following postures more comfortable is to place a small cushion under the buttocks.

SUKHASANA



Sukhasana (easy pose)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.
Bend the right leg and place the foot under the left thigh.
Bend the left leg and place the foot under the right thigh.
Place the hands on the knees in chin or jnana mudra.
Keep the head, neck and back upright and straight, but without strain. Close the eyes.
Relax the whole body. The arms should be relaxed and not held straight.

Benefits: Sukhasana is the easiest and most comfortable of the meditation postures. It can be utilised without ill effect by persons who are unable to sit in the more difficult meditation postures. It facilitates mental and physical balance without causing strain or pain.

Practice note: Sukhasana is a relaxing posture which may be used after extended periods of sitting in siddhasana or padmasana.

Although sukhasana is said to be the simplest meditation posture, it is difficult to sustain for long periods of time unless the knees are close to the ground or on the ground. Otherwise most of the body weight is supported by the buttocks and backache develops. The other meditation asanas create a larger and, therefore, steadier area of support.

Variation: For those who are extremely stiff, sukhasana may be performed sitting cross-legged with a belt or cloth tied around the knees and lower back.
Hold the spine upright.

Concentrate on the physical balance and equalising the weight on the right and left side of the body. A light, spacey feeling may be experienced.

While maintaining the posture, place the hands on the knees in chin or jnana mudra (see section on mudras).

ARDHA PADMASANA



Ardha Padmasana (half-lotus pose)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Bend one leg and place the sole of the foot on the inside of the opposite thigh.

Bend the other leg and place the foot on top of the opposite thigh.

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Without straining, try to place the upper heel as near as possible to the abdomen. Adjust the position so that it is comfortable.

Place the hands on the knees in either chin or jnana mudra.

Keep the back, neck and head upright and straight. Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

Contra-indications: Those who suffer from sciatica or sacral ailments should not perform this asana.

Benefits: The same as for padmasana but at a reduced level.

PADMASANA

Sciatica

Sacral ailments



Padmasana (lotus pose)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Slowly and carefully bend one leg and place the foot on top of the opposite thigh.

The sole should face upward and the heel should be close to the pubic bone.

When this feels comfortable, bend the other leg and place the foot on top of the opposite thigh.

Both knees should, ideally, touch the ground in the final position.

The head and spine should be held upright and the shoulders relaxed.

Place the hands on the knees in chin or jnana mudra.

Relax the arms with the elbows slightly bent and check that the shoulders are not raised or hunched.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

Observe the total posture of the body. Make the necessary adjustments by moving forward or backward until balance and alignment are experienced. Perfect alignment indicates the correct posture of padmasana.

Contra-indications: Those who suffer from sciatica, sacral infections or weak or injured knees should not perform this asana. This asana should not be attempted until flexibility of the knees has been developed through practice of the pre-meditation asanas.

Benefits: Padmasana allows the body to be held completely steady for long periods of time. It holds the trunk and head like a pillar with the legs as the firm foundation. As the body is steadied the mind becomes calm. This steadiness and calmness is the first step towards real meditation.

Padmasana directs the flow of prana from mooladhara chakra in the perineum, to sahasrara chakra in the head, heightening the experience of meditation.

This posture applies pressure to the lower spine which has a relaxing effect on the nervous system. The breath becomes slow, muscular tension is decreased and blood pressure is reduced. The coccygeal and sacral nerves are toned as the normally large blood flow to the legs is redirected to the abdominal region. This activity also stimulates the digestive process.

SIDDHASANA



Siddhasana (accomplished pose for men)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Bend the right leg and place the sole of the foot flat against the inner left thigh with the heel pressing the perineum (the area midway between the genitals and the anus), sitting on top of the right heel.

This is an important aspect of siddhasana.

Adjust the body until it is comfortable and the pressure of the heel is firmly applied.

Bend the left leg and place the left ankle directly over the right ankle so that the ankle bones are touching and the heels are one above the other.

Press the pubis with the left heel directly above the genitals.

The genitals will, therefore, lie between the two heels.

If this last position is too difficult, simply place the left

heel as near as possible to the pubis.

Push the toes and the outer edge of the left foot into the space between the right calf and thigh muscles. If necessary, this space may be enlarged slightly by using the hands or temporarily adjusting the position of the right leg.

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Grasp the right toes and pull them up into the space between the left calf and thigh.

Again adjust the body so that it is comfortable.

The legs should now be locked, with the knees touching the ground and the left heel directly above the right heel. Make the spine erect and feel as though the body is fixed on the floor. Place the hands on the knees in jnana, chin or chinmaya mudra.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

Contra-indications: Siddhasana should not be practised by those with sciatica or sacral infections.

Benefits: Siddhasana directs the energy from the lower psychic centres upward through the spine, stimulating the brain and calming the entire nervous system. The position of the lower foot at the perineum presses mooladhara chakra, stimulating moola bandha, and the pressure applied to the pubic bone presses the trigger point for swadhisthana, automatically activating vajroli/sahajoli mudra. These two psycho-muscular locks redirect sexual nervous impulses back up the spinal cord to the brain, establishing control over the reproductive hormones which is necessary in order to maintain brahmacharya for spiritual purposes. Prolonged periods in siddhasana result in noticeable tingling sensations in the mooladhara region which may last for ten to fifteen minutes. This is caused by a reduction in the blood supply to the area and by a rebalancing of the pranic flow in the lower chakras.

This posture redirects blood circulation to the lower spine and abdomen, toning the lumbar region of the spine, the pelvis and the abdominal organs, and balancing the reproductive system and the blood pressure.

Practice note: Siddhasana may be performed with either leg uppermost. Many people experience discomfort due to the pressure applied where the ankles cross each other. If necessary, place a folded cloth or piece of sponge between the legs at this point. At first the pressure at the perineum may be uncomfortable to maintain but with practice this will be eased.

Note: *The Sanskrit word siddha means 'power' and 'perfection'. The word siddhi is derived from siddha and refers to a psychic power or faculty developed through yogic practices. Siddhis include clairvoyance and telepathy as well as many other lesser known powers such as the ability to disappear at will. Siddhasana, or siddha yoni asana for women, is believed to be the asana that helps develop these powers.*

SIDDHA YONI ASANA



Siddha Yoni Asana (accomplished pose for women)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Bend the right leg and place the sole of the foot flat against the inner left thigh.

Place this heel firmly against or inside the labia majora of the vagina.

Adjust the body position so that it is comfortable while simultaneously feeling the pressure of the right heel.

Bend the left leg and place the left heel directly on top of the right heel so it presses the clitoris, and wedge the left toes down into the space between the calf and thigh so they touch, or almost touch, the floor.

Grasp the toes of the right foot and pull them up into the space between the left calf and thigh.

Again, adjust the position so that it is comfortable.

Ensure that the knees are firmly on the ground.

Make the spine fully erect and straight as though it were planted solidly in the earth.

Place the hands on the knees in chin, jnana or chinmaya mudra.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

Contra-indications: As for siddhasana.

Benefits: As for siddhasana.

Note: *The Sanskrit word yoni means womb' or 'source'.*

SWASTIKASANA

Swastikasana (auspicious pose)

Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Bend the left knee and place the sole of the left foot against the inside of the right thigh, so there is no contact between the heel and the perineum.

Bend the right knee and place the right foot in the space between the left thigh and calf muscle, so there is no contact between the heel and the pubis.

Grasp the toes of the left foot and pull them up into the space between the right calf and thigh.

Adjust the position so that it is comfortable. The knees should be firmly on the floor.

Straighten the spine.

Place the hands on the knees in chin, jnana or chinmaya mudra.

Variation: Sit with the legs straight in front of the body.

Bend the left leg, place the sole against the inside of the right thigh.

Similarly, bend the right leg and place the heel of the right foot on the floor in front of the left foot with the sole resting against the left shin. The heels will now be one in front of the other.

The hands may be placed on the knees in jnana, chin or chinmaya mudra, or they may be placed on the lap.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

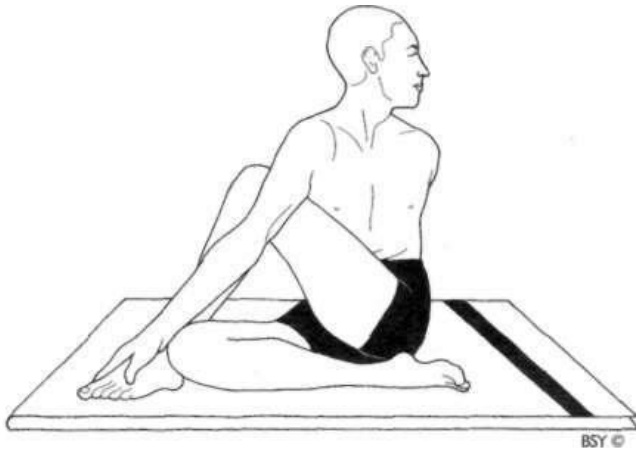
Contra-indications: Swastikasana should not be performed by people with sciatica or sacral infections.

Benefits: Swastikasana is a healthy position to sit in especially for those suffering from varicose veins, tired and aching muscles or fluid retention in the legs.

Practice note: This is the easiest classical meditation asana and is a simplified version of siddhasana.

Note: *Here the symbol of the swastika represents the different corners of the earth and universe, the spokes, and their meeting point and common centre of consciousness. This asana may be regarded as the one most favourable for realising the unity of existence.*

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA



Ardha Matsyendrasana (half spinal twist)

Sit with the legs stretched out in front of the body.

Bend the right leg and place the right foot flat on the floor on the outside of the left knee.

The toes of the right foot should face forward.

Bend the left leg and bring the foot around to the right buttock. The outside edge of the foot should be in contact with the floor.

Pass the left arm through the space between the chest and the right knee, and place it against the outside of the right leg-

Hold the right foot or ankle with the left hand, so that the right knee is close to the left armpit.

Sit up as straight as possible.

Raise the right arm in front of the body and gaze at the fingertips.

Slowly twist to the right, simultaneously moving the arm, trunk and head.

Use the left arm as a lever against the right leg to twist the trunk as far as possible without using the back muscles.

Follow the tips of the fingers of the right hand with the gaze and look over the right shoulder.

Do not strain the back.

Bend the right elbow and place the arm around the back of the waist. The back of the right hand should wrap around the left side of the waist.

Alternatively, it can be placed as high as possible between the shoulder blades with the fingers pointing up. This arm position enforces the straightness of the spine.

Reverse the movements to come out of the posture and repeat on the other side.

Breathing: Inhale in the forward position.

Exhale while twisting the trunk.

Breathe deeply and slowly without strain in the final position.

Inhale while returning to the starting position.

Duration: Practise once on each side, gradually increasing the holding time to 1 or 2 minutes on each side of the body or

up to 30 breaths.

Awareness: Physical - on keeping the spine straight and on the movement of the abdomen created by the breath in the final position.

Spiritual - on ajna chakra.

Sequence: This asana should be performed after completing a series of forward and backward bending asanas.

Contra-indications: Women more than two or three months pregnant should avoid this practice. People suffering from peptic ulcer, hernia or hyperthyroidism should only practise this pose under expert guidance.

People with sciatica or slipped disc may benefit from this asana, but great care should be taken.

Benefits: This asana simultaneously stretches the muscles on one side of the back and abdomen while contracting the muscles on the other side. It tones the nerves of the spine, makes the back muscles supple, relieves lumbago and muscular spasms, and reduces the tendency of adjoining vertebrae to develop osteophytes. When practised with care, it has proved beneficial for mild cases of slipped disc.

Ardha matsyendrasana massages the abdominal organs, alleviating digestive ailments. It regulates the secretion of adrenaline and bile and is recommended in the yogic management of diabetes. Under special guidance it is used for the yogic management of sinusitis, hay fever, bronchitis, constipation, colitis, menstrual disorders, urinary tract disorders and cervical spondylitis, as long as it can be performed without any discomfort.

Variation: For beginners and those with stiff bodies the following adjustments to the position may be made:

The leg that is placed by the side of the buttock should remain straight and the hand holding the ankle may be wrapped around the opposite thigh, hugging the knee to the chest.

BHUJANGASANA (COBRA POSE)



INSTRUCTIONS:

- ☐ Keep the hands and feet in place.
- ☐ Slide the chest forward and raise first the head, the shoulders, then, straightening the elbows, arch the back into the

cobra pose.

- ☐ This will lower the buttocks and hips to the floor.
- ☐ Bend the head back and direct the gaze upward to the eyebrow centre.
- ☐ The thighs and hips remain on the floor and the arms support the trunk.
- ☐ Unless the spine is very flexible the arms will remain slightly bent.

BENEFITS OF BHUJANGASANA:

- ☐ It deepens the breath.
- ☐ It helps in removing backache.
- ☐ It keeps the spine flexible and healthy.
- ☐ It tones the liver, kidneys, ovaries, and uterus.

CONTRADICTION OF BHUJANGASANA:

- ☐ Avoid if one is suffering from peptic ulcers or Hernia.
- ☐ Pregnant woman should avoid this practice.

DHANURASANA (BOW POSE)



INSTRUCTIONS:

- ☐ Lie flat on the stomach with the legs and feet together, and the arms and hands beside the body.
- ☐ Bend the knees and bring the heels close to the buttocks. Grasp the ankles with the hands.
- ☐ Keep the knees and thighs firmly on the floor and the arms straight throughout the practice.
- ☐ Place the chin on the floor.
- ☐ This is the starting position.
- ☐ Tense the legs and push the feet backwards while raising the head and chest as high as possible from the floor without straining.
- ☐ Use the backward movement of the legs to assist the raising of the body, allowing the back muscles to remain passive.
- ☐ In the final position the head is tilted back.
- ☐ Hold the final position for as long as is comfortable.
- ☐ Slowly lower the chest and head to the ground by releasing the legs.

□ Relax in the prone position until the respiration returns to normal. This is one round.

BENEFITS OF DHANURASANA:

The same benefits as for Dhanurasana, but at decreased levels.

□ It is useful for lower back pain due to slipped disc or cervical spondylitis when it can be performed without discomfort.

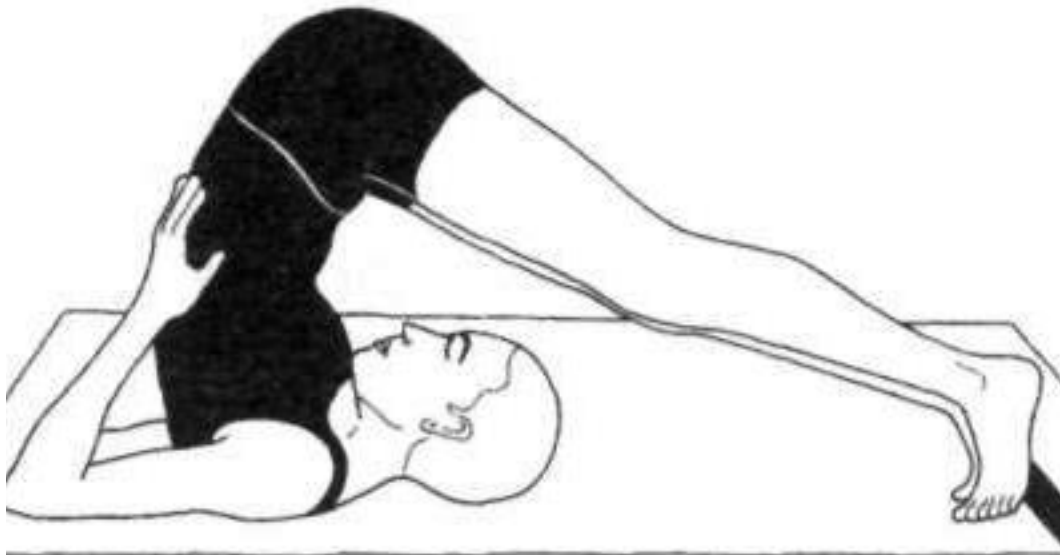
□ It tones the heart and lungs and is beneficial for respiratory disorders. It helps to improve the posture.

CONTRADICTION OF DHANURASANA:

□ People who suffer with heart problems, high blood pressure should avoid it.

□ A person suffering from Hernia, peptic ulcers or duodenal ulcers, appendicitis and the other abdominal ailments should not do this asana.

HALASANA



Halasana (plough pose)

Lie flat on the back with the legs and feet together. Place the arms beside the body with the palms facing down.

Relax the whole body.

Raise both legs to the vertical position, keeping them straight and together, using only the abdominal muscles.

Press down on the arms and lift the buttocks, rolling the back away from the floor. Lower the legs over the head.

Try to touch the toes to the floor behind the head.

Do not force the toes to touch the floor.

Turn the palms up, bend the elbows and place the hands behind the ribcage to support the back as in sarvangasana.

Relax and hold the final pose for as long as is comfortable.

Return to the starting position by lowering the arms with the palms facing down, then slowly lower the back and buttocks to the floor.

Raise the legs to the vertical position. Using the abdominal muscles, lower the legs to the starting position, keeping the knees straight.

Breathing: Inhale while in the lying position.

Retain the breath inside while assuming the final pose.

Breathe slowly and deeply in the final pose.

Retain the breath inside while returning to the starting position.

Duration: Beginners should hold the pose for 15 seconds, gradually adding a few seconds per week until it can be held for one minute.

Adepts may hold the final pose up to 10 minutes or longer.

Awareness: Physical - on the abdomen, relaxation of the back muscles, the respiration or the thyroid gland.

Spiritual - on manipura or vishuddhi chakra.

Sequence: If possible, perform this asana immediately after sarvangasana. To go from sarvangasana to halasana, bring the feet slightly over the head for balance, slowly remove the arms from their position behind the back and place them on the floor in the starting position, palms facing down. Relax the body and slowly lower the legs over the head, keeping them straight and together, until the toes touch the floor. Keep the legs straight and continue as described above.

Follow halasana with either matsyasana, ushtrasana or supta vajrasana as a counterpose, practised for half the combined duration of sarvangasana and halasana. It may also be followed by the variations for halasana given at the end of this chapter. Halasana is a good preparatory practice for paschimottanasana.

Contra-indications: This asana should not be practised by those who suffer from hernia, slipped disc, sciatica, high blood pressure or any serious back problem, especially arthritis of the neck.

Benefits: The movement of the diaphragm which takes place during the practice of halasana massages all the internal organs, activates the digestion, relieving constipation and dyspepsia, revitalises the spleen and the suprarenal glands, promotes the production of insulin by the pancreas and improves liver and kidney function. It strengthens the abdominal muscles, relieves spasms in the back muscles, tones the spinal nerves, improving the operation of the sympathetic nervous system, and increases blood circulation to the whole area. It regulates the activities of the thyroid gland which balances the body's metabolic rate, and stimulates the thymus gland, boosting the immune system.

It is used in yoga therapy for the management of asthma, bronchitis, constipation, hepatitis, urinary tract and menstrual disorders.

SARVANGASANA (SHOULDER STAND)



Sarvangasana, shoulder stand or more fully Salamba Sarvangasana, is an inverted pose. The word 'Sarvang' means entire body. From the final position of asana, it can be deduced that it has a favorable effect on entire body. It is strongly recommended to attempt this posture only after a few weeks of initial training.

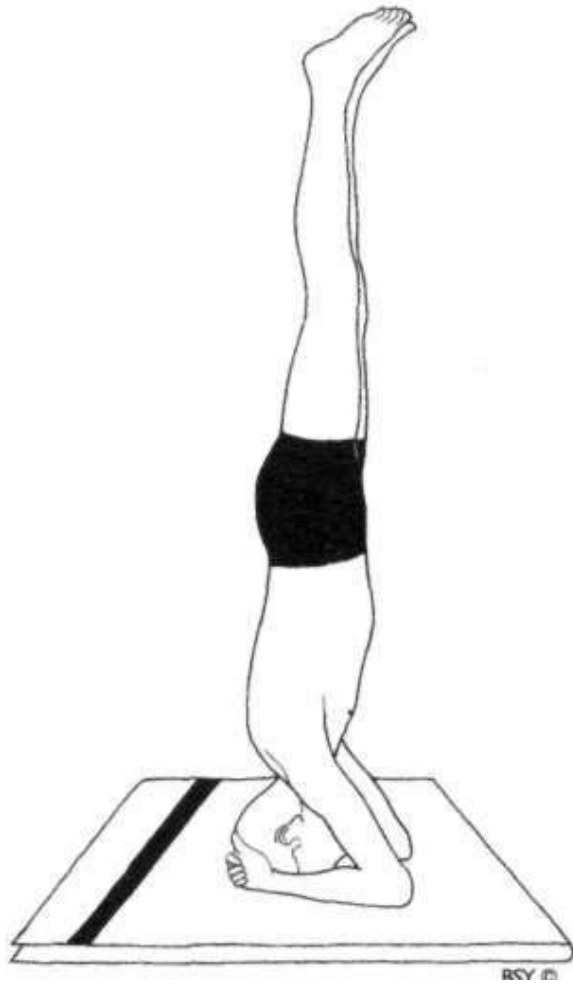
BENEFITS:

- It stimulates the thyroid and parathyroid glands and normalizes their functions.
- It preserves the youth by keeping the spine elastic.
- It cures constipation, indigestion, diabetes, varicose veins and menstrual disorders.
- It helps in achieving perfect health.

CONTRADICTIONS:

□ Practitioners suffering from abnormal blood pressure, glaucoma, detached retina, chronic thyroid disorders, and neck or shoulder injuries should avoid this asana. Practice only after consulting the trained yoga practitioner.

SIRSHASANA



Sirshasana (headstand pose)

Stage 1: Sit in vajrasana.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body.

After a few minutes, open the eyes, bend forward and place the forearms on a folded blanket with the fingers interlocked and the elbows in front of the knees.

The distance between the elbows should be equal to the distance from each elbow to the interlocked fingers, forming an equilateral triangle.

Place the crown of the head on the blanket between the interlocked fingers. Wrap the hands around the head to make a firm support so that it cannot roll backward when pressure is applied.

Stage 2: Lift the knees and buttocks off the floor and straighten the legs.

Stage 3: Slowly walk the feet as close as possible towards the trunk and head, gradually moving the back towards the vertical position.

Bend the knees slightly, press the thighs against the abdomen and lower chest.

Transfer the body weight slowly from the toes onto the head and arms, maintaining a steady balance.

Raise one foot off the floor about 20 cm, carefully balance, then raise the other foot and balance on the head and arms.

Stage 4: Bending the knees, gradually raise the calves in a controlled movement. Adjust the trunk slightly to counterbalance the weight of the legs.

Fold the legs back so the heels move towards the buttocks.

To accomplish this movement contract the muscles of the lower back. The knees are now pointing down with the legs together.

Maintain the position for a few seconds, being aware of complete balance before proceeding.

Stage 5: Raise the knees to the vertical position. Keeping the heels near the buttocks, slowly straighten the hips so that the thighs move up and away from the torso.

Raise the knees until they point directly upward and the thighs are in line with the trunk.

Balance the body.

Stage 6: Slowly straighten the knees and raise the calves.

The whole body should be in one straight line with the feet relaxed.

This is the final position.

Close the eyes and balance the whole body, relaxing in the final position for as long as is comfortable.

Stage 7: Return to the starting position.

Slowly bend the knees and lower the body with control in the reverse order until the toes touch the floor. Remain with the head on the ground in the kneeling position for a short time, then slowly return to the upright position.

Breathing: Inhale at the end of stage 1.

Retain the breath inside while raising the body into the final position. Beginners may practise normal breathing while coming into the posture.

Breathe normally in the final position. The breath should become increasingly subtle in this posture as one becomes accustomed to it.

Duration: Beginners should start by holding the pose for 30 seconds, gradually adding about 1 minute per week until the desired period is reached. 3 to 5 minutes spent in the final position is sufficient for general health, however, sirshasana may be practised by experts for periods of up to 30 minutes.

Awareness: Physical - for beginners, on maintaining balance. For adepts, on the brain, centre of the head or respiration. Spiritual - on sahasrara chakra.

Sequence: While beginners should practise sirshasana at the end of their asana programme, more experienced practitioners may perform it either at the beginning or the end.

It should be followed by tadasana, as a counterpose, and then shavasana.

Contra-indications: Sirshasana should not be practised by people with high blood pressure, heart disease, thrombosis, arteriosclerosis, chronic catarrh, chronic constipation, kidney problems, impure blood, severe near-sightedness, weak eye blood vessels, conjunctivitis, chronic glaucoma, inflammation of the ears or any form of blood haemorrhage in the head; neither should it be practised during pregnancy or menstruation. Although it is recommended as a preventative measure for headache or migraine, it should not be practised during either.

Benefits: This asana is very powerful for awakening sahasrara chakra and, therefore, it is considered the greatest of all asanas.

Sirshasana increases the blood flow to the brain and pituitary gland, revitalising the entire body and mind. It relieves anxiety and other psychological disturbances which form the root cause of many disorders. It is, therefore, recommended for the prevention of asthma, hay fever, diabetes and menopausal imbalance. It also helps to rectify many forms of nervous and glandular disorder, especially those related to the reproductive system.

This asana reverses the effect of gravity on the spine. Strain on the back is thus alleviated and the reversed flow of blood in the legs and visceral regions aids tissue regeneration. The weight of the abdominal organs on the diaphragm encourages deep exhalation so that larger amounts of carbon dioxide, toxins and bacteria are removed from the lungs.

Practice note: In the final position, most of the weight of the body is sustained by the top of the head, the arms being used to maintain balance only. Beginners, however, may use the arms as support until the neck is strong enough to bear the full weight of the body, and a reasonable sense of balance has been developed.

If the practitioner should fall during the practice, the body should be as relaxed as possible. If the fall is forward, try to fold the knees into the chest so that the impact on the floor is sustained by the feet. If falling backwards, arch the back, again so that the feet sustain the impact.

Surya Namaskara



SALUTATIONS TO THE SUN

The Sanskrit name *surya* here refers to the sun and *namaskara* means 'salutations'. Surya namaskara has been handed down from the enlightened sages of the Vedic Age. The sun symbolises spiritual consciousness and, in ancient times, was worshipped on a daily basis. In yoga the sun is represented by pingala or surya nadi, the pranic channel which carries the vital, life-giving force.

This dynamic group of asanas is not regarded as being a traditional part of hatha yoga practices as it was added to the original asana group at a later time. However, it is an effective way of loosening up, stretching, massaging and toning all the joints, muscles and internal organs of the body. Its versatility and application make it one of the most useful methods of inducing a healthy, vigorous and active life while, at the same time, preparing for spiritual awakening and the resulting expansion of awareness.

Surya namaskara is a complete *sadhana*, spiritual practice, in itself for it includes asana, pranayama, mantra and meditation techniques. It is an excellent group of asanas with which to start morning practice. Surya namaskara has a direct vitalising effect on the solar energy of the body which flows through pingala nadi. Regular practice of surya namaskara regulates pingala nadi, whether it is under-active or overactive. Regulation of pingala nadi leads to a balanced energy system at both mental and physical levels.

Surya namaskara is composed of three elements: form,

energy and rhythm. The twelve asanas are the physical matrix around which the form of the practice is woven. These asanas generate prana, the subtle energy which activates the psychic body. Their performance, in a steady, rhythmic sequence, reflects the rhythms of the universe; the twenty-four hours of the day, the twelve zodiac phases of the year and the biorhythms of the body. The application of this form and rhythm to the body/mind complex generates the transforming force which produces a fuller and more dynamic life.

Time of practice: The ideal time to practise surya namaskara is at sunrise, the most peaceful time of day. Whenever possible, practise in the open air, facing the rising sun. Sunset is also a good time to practise as it stimulates the digestive fire. Surya namaskara, however, may be practised at any time provided the stomach is empty.

Preparation: Before commencing the practice, stand with the feet together or slightly apart, and the arms hanging loosely by the side of the body. Close the eyes gently and become aware of the whole physical body as one homogeneous unit. In this position the body may sway from side to side or backward and forward. Try to minimise this oscillation and balance the body weight equally on both feet.

Bring the awareness inside the body and mentally begin to relax it. Starting from the top of the head, take the awareness systematically through all the parts, releasing any tension. Intensify, once more, the awareness of the whole physical body and feel in harmony with it.

Take the awareness to the soles of the feet in contact with the floor. Feel that the whole body is being pulled downwards by gravity and that any tensions are being pulled down, through the body and into the ground. At the same time, experience the vital force surging up from the earth and flooding the whole being.

Finally, take the awareness to the eyebrow centre and visualise a brilliant, red rising sun infusing the whole body and mind with its vitalising and healing rays. Imagine you are facing the early morning sunrise, about to practise surya namaskara with smooth synchronised movements, flowing into one another like a dance.

Position 1: Pranamasana (prayer pose)

This is the final position and is the same as position 1.

Bring the palms together in front of the chest.

Breathing: Exhale while assuming the final position.

Awareness: Physical - on the region of the heart.

Spiritual - on anahata chakra.

Mantra: *Om Mitraye Namaha.*

HASTA UTTHANASANA

Position 2: Hasta Utthanasana (raised arms pose)

Raise and stretch both arms above the head.

Keep the arms separated, shoulder width apart.

Bend the head, arms and upper trunk backward.

Breathing: Inhale while raising the arms.

Awareness: Physical - on the stretch of the abdomen and expansion of the lungs.

Spiritual - on vishuddhi chakra.

Mantra: *Om Ravaye Namaha*, salutations to the shining one.

Benefits: This pose stretches all the abdominal organs and improves digestion. It exercises the arm and shoulder muscles, tones the spinal nerves, opens the lungs and removes excess weight.

PADAHASTASANA

Position 3: Padahastasana (hand to foot pose)

Bend forward until the fingers or palms of the hands touch the floor on either side of the feet.

Try to touch the knees with the forehead.

Do not strain.

Keep the knees straight.

Breathing: Exhale while bending forward.

Try to contract the abdomen in the final position to expel the maximum amount of air from the lungs.

Awareness: Physical - on the pelvic region.

Spiritual - on swadhisthana chakra.

Mantra: *Om Suryaya Namaha*, salutations to he who induces activity.

Contra-indications: People with back conditions should not bend forward fully. Bend from the hips, keeping the spine straight, until the back forms a ninety degree angle with the legs, or bend only as far as comfortable.

Benefits: This pose is useful in eliminating or preventing stomach or abdominal ailments. It reduces excess weight in the abdominal region, improves digestion and helps to remove constipation. It improves blood circulation, makes the spine supple and tones the spinal nerves.

ASHWA SANCHALANASANA

Position 4: Ashwa Sanchalanasana (equestrian pose)

Place the palms of the hands flat on the floor beside the feet.

Stretch the right leg back as far as possible.

At the same time, bend the left knee, keeping the left foot on the floor in the same position. Keep the arms straight.

In the final position, the weight of the body should be supported on both hands, the left foot, right knee and toes of the right foot. The head should be tilted backward, the back arched and the inner gaze directed upward to the eyebrow centre.

Breathing: Inhale while stretching the right leg back.

Awareness: Physical - on the stretch from the thigh to the chest or on the eyebrow centre.

Spiritual - on ajna chakra.

Mantra: *Om Bhanave Namaha*, salutations to he who illumines.

Benefits: This pose massages the abdominal organs and improves their functioning, strengthens the leg muscles and induces balance in the nervous system.

Practice note: In the final pose the palms of the hands should be flat on the floor initially. Later on, more advanced practitioners may come up onto the fingertips.

PARVATASANA

Position 5: Parvatasana (mountain pose)

Take the left foot back beside the right foot.

Simultaneously, raise the buttocks and lower the head between the arms, so that the back and legs form two sides of a triangle.

The legs and arms should be straight in the final position.

Try to keep the heels on the floor in the final pose and bring the head towards the knees.

Do not strain.

Breathing: Exhale while taking the left leg back.

Awareness: Physical - on relaxing the hips or on the throat region.

Spiritual - on vishuddhi chakra.

Mantra: *Om Khagaya Namaha*, salutations to he who moves quickly in the sky.

Benefits: This pose strengthens the nerves and muscles in the arms and legs. The spinal nerves are toned and circulation is stimulated especially in the upper spine, between the shoulder blades.

ASHTANGA NAMASKARA

Position 6: Ashtanga Namaskara (salute with eight parts or points)

Lower the knees, chest and chin to the floor.

In the final position only the toes, knees, chest, hands and chin touch the floor. The knees, chest and chin should touch the floor simultaneously. If this is not possible, first lower the knees, then the chest, and finally the chin.

The buttocks, hips and abdomen should be raised.

Breathing: The breath is held outside in this pose. There is no respiration.

Awareness: Physical - on the abdominal region.

Spiritual - on manipura chakra.

Mantra: *Om Pushne Namaha*, salutations to the giver of strength.

Benefits: This pose strengthens the leg and arm muscles, develops the chest and exercises the region of the spine between the shoulder blades.

BHUJANGASANA

Position 7: Bhujangasana (cobra pose)

Lower the buttocks and hips to the floor,

Straightening the elbows, arch the back and push the chest forward into the cobra pose.

Bend the head back and direct the gaze upward to the eyebrow centre.

The thighs and hips remain on the floor and the arms

support the trunk.

Unless the spine is very flexible the arms will remain slightly bent.

Breathing: Inhale while raising the torso and arching the back.

Awareness: Physical - on relaxation of the spine.

Spiritual - on swadhisthana chakra.

Mantra: *Om Hiranya Garbhaya Namaha*, salutations to the golden, cosmic self.

Benefits: This pose keeps the spine supple, improving circulation in the back region and toning the spinal nerves. It tones the reproductive organs, stimulates digestion and relieves constipation. It also tones the liver and massages the kidneys and adrenal glands.

Position 8: Parvatasana (mountain pose)

This stage is a repeat of position 5.

From bhujangasana assume parvatasana.

The hands and feet do not move from position 7.

Raise the buttocks and lower the heels to the floor.

Breathing: Exhale while raising the buttocks.

Awareness: Physical - on relaxing the hips or on the throat region.

Spiritual - on vishuddhi chakra.

Mantra: *Om Marichaye Namaha*, salutations to the Lord of the Dawn.

Position 9: Ashwa Sanchalanasana (equestrian pose)

This stage is the same as position 4.

Keep the palms flat on the floor.

Bend the left leg and bring the left foot forward between the hands.

Simultaneously, lower the right knee so that it touches the floor and push the pelvis forward.

Tilt the head backward, arch the back and gaze at the eyebrow centre.

Breathing: Inhale while assuming the pose.

Awareness: Physical - on the stretch from the thigh to the chest, or on the eyebrow centre.

Spiritual - on ajna chakra.

Mantra: *Om Adityaya Namaha*, salutations to the son of Aditi, the cosmic Mother.

Position 10: Padahastasana (hand to foot pose)

This position is a repeat of position 3.

Bring the right foot forward next to the left foot.

Straighten both knees.

Bring the forehead as close to the knees as possible without straining.

Breathing: Exhale while performing the movement.

Awareness: Physical - on the pelvic region.

Spiritual - on swadhisthana chakra.

Mantra: *Om Savitre Namaha*, salutations to Lord of Creation.

Position 11: Hasta Utthanasana (raised arms pose)

This stage is a repeat of position 2.

Raise the torso and stretch the arms above the head.

Keep the arms separated, shoulder width apart.

Bend the head, arms and upper trunk backward.

Breathing: Inhale while straightening the body.

Awareness: Physical - on the stretch of the abdomen and expansion of the lungs.

Spiritual - on vishuddhi chakra.

Mantra: *Om Arkaya Namaha*, salutations to he who is fit to be praised.

Position 12: Pranamasana (prayer pose)

This is the final position and is the same as position 1.

Bring the palms together in front of the chest.

Breathing: Exhale while assuming the final position.

Awareness: Physical - on the region of the heart.

Spiritual - on anahata chakra.

Mantra: *Om Bhaskaraya Namaha*, salutations to he who leads to enlightenment.

Positions 13-24: The twelve positions of surya namaskara are practised twice to complete one round. Positions 1 to 12 constitute half a round. In the second half, the positions are repeated with two small changes:

a) In position 16, instead of stretching the right foot backward, stretch the left foot back.

b) In position 21, bend the right leg and bring the right foot between the hands.

Conclusion: On the completion of each half round, lower the arms to the side, relax the body and concentrate on the breath until it returns to normal. After completing surya namaskara, practise shavasana for a few minutes. This will allow the heartbeat and respiration to return to normal and all the muscles to relax.

Practice note: In reference to position 4: when practising surya namaskara for general or therapeutic purposes, begin by placing the right leg back to activate pingala nadi as described above; if practising for mental concentration or for a more meditative effect, begin with the left leg which will activate ida nadi.

Beeja mantras: As an alternative to the twelve names of the sun, there is a series of *beeja mantras* or seed syllables. Beeja mantras do not have any literal meaning but set up powerful vibrations of energy within the mind and body. The beeja mantras are six in number and are repeated consecutively in the following order, four times during a complete round of surya namaskara:

1. *Om Hraam* 4. *Om Hraim*

2. *Om Hreem* 5. *Om Hraum*

3. *Om Hroom* 6. *Om Hrah*

When surya namaskara is practised too fast to repeat the sun mantras, the beeja mantras may be used.

Duration: For spiritual benefits, practise 3 to 12 rounds slowly. For physical benefits, practise 3 to 12 rounds more quickly.

Beginners should start with 2 or 3 rounds and add one more round every few weeks to avoid fatigue. Advanced students may practise a larger number of rounds, however, strain should be avoided at all times. In special cases, a daily practice of 108 rounds may be undertaken for purification, but only under expert guidance.

Sequence: Surya namaskara is ideally practised before other asanas.

Contra-indications: The practice of surya namaskara should be immediately discontinued if a fever, acute inflammation, boils or rashes occur. These may develop due to excess toxins in the body. When the toxins have been eliminated, the practice may be resumed.

Surya namaskara should not be practised by people suffering from high blood pressure, coronary artery diseases, or by those who have had a stroke, as it may over stimulate or damage a weak heart or blood vessel system. It should also be avoided in cases of hernia or intestinal tuberculosis.

People with back conditions should consult a medical expert before commencing this practice. Although some back conditions may be alleviated by this practice, conditions such as slipped disc and sciatica will be better managed through an alternative asana programme.

During the onset of menstruation, this practice should be avoided. If there are no adverse effects, the practice may be resumed after the initial flow or towards the end of the period. During pregnancy it may be practised with care until the beginning of the twelfth week. Following childbirth, it may be commenced approximately forty days after delivery for re-toning the uterine muscles.

General benefits: The practice of surya namaskara as a whole gives a great number of benefits.

It stimulates and balances all the systems of the body, including the endocrine, circulatory, respiratory and digestive systems. Its influence on the pineal gland and the hypothalamus helps to prevent pineal degeneration and calcification. This balances the transition period between childhood and adolescence in growing children. Synchronising the breath with the physical movements of surya namaskara ensures that the practitioner, at least for a few minutes daily, breathes as deeply and rhythmically as possible. This removes carbon dioxide from the lungs and replaces it with fresh oxygen, increasing mental clarity by bringing fresh, oxygenated blood to the brain.

To conclude, surya namaskara is the ideal practice to increase awareness and bestow good health and wellbeing.

Note: For more information on this practice see the Bihar School of Yoga publication *Surya Namaskara: A Technique of Solar Revitalization*.