

basics

downward-facing dog

by Jason Crandell

Get Down Dog

DOWNDOWN-FACING DOG is the salt of hatha yoga, sprinkled intermittently throughout class from beginning to end. Just as pinches of salt enliven a dish, so Downward Dog enlivens your body—from your hips to your spine to your fingers and toes—making you feel more vibrant and alive, even spicier. As you discover the nuances of the pose, you'll find it gets deeper and more flavorful, so you savor it more.

Downward-Facing Dog looks so easy and so beautiful, but looks can be deceiving. This pose is actually quite complex, and its benefits far-reaching. It both strengthens and stretches your entire body and requires you to balance the effort in your arms, torso, and legs so you don't overburden any one area. Hold it for a few breaths and you'll see what I mean.

In flow classes, Downward Dog is a lot like home base—you do it over and over again to neutralize your spine, to bring it back into its natural alignment. It's also an inversion, preparing beginners for the feeling of going upside down. A pose with so many benefits is worth learning in detail. So even if you've done more Down Dogs than you can count, these first two

**Arms reaching,
hips lifting, spine
stretching: Down-
ward Dog creates a
symphony of sweet
sensations all
through your body.**







Pose Benefits

- Develops suppleness and strength in the arms and shoulders**
- Elongates the spine**
- Creates greater flexibility in the hamstrings and calves**
- Helps calm the nervous system**

Contraindications

- Hamstring injury**
- Wrist problems**
- Spinal disk injury**

versions will help you rediscover it, refine it, and feel it in all its glory.

When you first try Down Dog, you may feel tight in areas you never knew existed. Your lower back might round and your elbows may bend and bow. But with daily practice, you'll love the sensation of unfurling your body into the pose, feeling long and lithe like a dog stretching after a good nap.

BEND YOUR KNEES

In the first version of the pose (*above*), you bend your knees, which removes the hamstrings from the equation and allows you to fully extend through your upper body.

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hands: Feel where they're in full contact with the mat and where they're not anchored. Spread your fingers wide and press firmly and evenly through your hands into the mat. By dispersing your weight evenly across your hand, your wrists will be more stable and less vulnerable to injury.

With your hands rooted to the mat, tuck your toes under so your heels come off the floor. Lift your knees off the mat and shift your pelvis up toward the ceiling and back toward the wall behind you, keeping your knees bent. Instead of lifting up in a pushup position, press back. Imagine pressing the floor down and away from your pelvis.

For the next few breaths, begin to refine the pose, starting with your hands. If your thumb and index fingers are off the ground, you're bearing too much weight in your outer hands. To counter this, try to create a perfect palm print on the mat: Spread your fingers, reach through your arms, and press down with both hands.

Now try to straighten your elbows. This can feel demanding either because you have tight shoulders or you lack strength, so be compassionate and patient as you try this. Next, rotate your arms externally (away from your ears) until your elbow creases face your thumbs. Feel the broadness of your upper back and the charge in your arms and shoulders.

With your arms awake and aligned, shift your chest toward your legs. Feel your

With your knees straight you might feel bunched and crunched. With your knees bent you'll find a long, juicy stretch through your spine, shoulders, and arms.

To start, lie face-down on your mat and place your hands on the floor by your shoulders. Keeping your hands and feet where they are, shift onto your hands and knees. Your knees should be as far apart as your hips, and your hands as far apart as your shoulders. This is the correct placement for your hands and feet in these two versions of the pose.

Your hands and feet are the foundation of the pose, so they should be solid and grounded. Bring your awareness to your



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armpit area lengthen and your chest open. As you continue to reach your arms, your pelvis will lift further up and shift back, and your spine will lengthen, unravel, and decompress.

Last but not least, release the tension in your neck; let your head hang naturally between your arms. After three to five breaths, exhale and bring your knees to the floor. Rest in Balasana (Child's Pose) for a few breaths before coming into version 2 of the pose.

MAKE LIKE AN "A"

When you practice Downward Dog in class, you might feel as if everyone has their heels on the ground except you. In this version you don't have to worry about that at all—in fact, you intentionally keep your heels lifted. This will give you more play in your pelvis so you can begin to understand its alignment in the pose.

Come back to the first version of the pose. This time, lift your heels as far away from the floor as you can. Straighten your knees, engage the muscles in your thighs, and lift your pelvis toward the ceiling. Your pelvis will shift forward as you do this and your body will look like a capital "A."

From this position, roll your sitting bones up toward the ceiling. Observe how this rotation of your pelvis lifts your heels further from the floor. Also, notice how the top of your sacrum tilts forward and into your back. Unless you are very mobile in your spine, this is a healthy position for your lower back. Without these fundamental shifts, you might end up looking like a sad, hesitant dog—back rounded, buttocks curled under. This is dangerous and can lead to injuries in your lower back or hamstrings.

So, with your pelvis tilted forward in its proper alignment, firm the very tops of your thighs and lift them toward your hip creases. Draw your thighbones up into your pelvis, and roll your sitting bones even higher, forming a taller, more acutely angled "A" shape. To keep your legs straight, don't jam or force your knees back; use the

sutra school

Yoga Sutra 1.1

Now, the teachings of yoga.

Atha yoga anushasanam

So reads the first stanza (sutra) of Patanjali's 2,000-year-old yoga guidebook, the Yoga Sutra. It's quite possibly one of the most famous opening lines in all of Hindu spiritual literature, but most eager students, intent on getting to the juicier parts of the teachings, sail past the first word, "now" (in Sanskrit *atha*, pronounced ah-tah) without a second thought.

But wait! One distinct characteristic of the sutra is brevity, so the word *atha* is there for good reason. It's there to grab your attention: I'm ready to teach, Patanjali is saying, so listen up. But *atha* also signals the value of what you're

about to dive into. These days you can flip through the Yoga Sutra whenever you please, and then return it to the shelf, but long ago it took a long period of preparation just to gain access to it. The study of

classical yoga was serious business that required commitment. At some point the teacher determined that—*atha*, "now"—the novice was qualified enough for instruction. It must have been an exhilarating moment when students left behind their everyday identities to assume a new role as spiritual aspirants.

For modern yogis, *atha* whispers a subtle reminder that all yoga teaching emerges from and leads us back to the timeless, ever-present now. Before you begin your next practice, say it silently and see if it draws you into the present. If you're really lucky, you might feel, in the words of Patanjali, that the "layers and imperfections concealing truth" are "washed away," and your authentic self is revealed.

be here now

You're often asked to chant Sanskrit in class, but there's nothing wrong with chanting in English if the words evoke meaning for you. Sit with your spine straight, close your eyes, and slow your breathing. With each exhalation, say the word "now" to yourself, drawing out the "w." Feel how the present moment becomes suspended even as time passes and transforms into another moment of now. RICHARD ROSEN

strength of your thighs to lift them. Feel how the strength of your legs supports the lift of your pelvis.

Now, one more time, press the tops of your thighs (not your knees) back toward the wall behind you. As you do this, your pelvis will move away from your hands, which will take some of the burden off your arms. Stay here for three to five smooth rounds of breath.

DO THE FULL DOG

The challenge in the full expression of Downward Dog is to fully extend your upper body and the backs of your legs while keeping from rounding your lower back. If your shoulders hunch forward or your lower back bulges toward the ceiling, continue to practice versions 1 and 2 for a few more weeks. Also, add Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose) to your practice, which will open your hamstrings and calves safely.

Come into the full pose by moving through versions 1 and 2 first. Rotate your upper arms away from your ears until your elbow creases face their respective thumbs. Keeping your heels lifted, press your hands evenly into the mat and straighten your arms. Draw your kneecaps up and take your thighs back to take some of the weight off your arms. Inch your pelvis further up and back and feel how the sides of your body lengthen. Roll your sitting bones up so your lower back arches into its natural curve.

Now that your body is fully engaged and working to create space, slowly reach your heels toward the mat. Imagine your heels filled with lead. Breathe deeply and allow the intensity of the stretch to peel away all those layers of tension from the back of your legs. Release your neck and soften your gaze.

Stay for three to five smooth, even breaths in this version of Downward Dog, then release into Child's Pose. Notice any sensations throughout your body, recognizing that this feeling of space, harmony, and ease is your body's true nature. ■

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