

## Adho Mukha Svanasana



# adho mukha svanasana

by Adam Bornstein

[downward facing dog pose]

*ahdo- mookha-svaan-as-ah-nah*

One of my most profound experiences in yoga occurred during a training course in yoga therapy. One of the teachers, Mukunda Stiles, asked me to demonstrate Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog pose) in front of the large assembly. This has always been a favourite pose of mine, so I was happy to oblige. I moved into the pose and Mukunda verbally helped me align my joints – from fingers to sitting bones to heels. My breath was flowing steadily during this 'adjusting' process. When the body was aligned, a shift occurred which was both subtle and profound. From initially focussing on all the separate parts, my mind blew open into an awareness of the whole. The next thing my conscious mind heard was Mukunda saying, "*This is asana*". Afterwards I was told that I held the pose for over five minutes and that my breath became imperceptible. When I descended from the pose and sat in Virasana (Hero's pose), I couldn't move for a long time as I had entered a deep state of stillness. In retrospect, I can say that the asana was being expressed through me rather than me doing the pose. The inward flow of life force was sustaining the body and influencing my mind to turn within.

This experience of 'being' yoga, as opposed to 'doing' yoga left a lasting impression. It reminded me that the self effort and discipline required to practise the asanas is a journey of attunement. When we align our body, breath and awareness, we approach the threshold of unity. We can then proceed deeper, and as we move beyond fragmentation, we open effortlessly into wholeness.

For our practice to be truly yoga, we need to be present. The body, the senses, all the various parts are ideally moving in the same direction. Aligning with the process of yoga is a major aspect of asana practise. The body, being so tangible, can be our launching pad to plumb the depths of our being and discover who we really are beyond persona and possessions.

Mental focus is essential for our yoga practice. This refers not to the busyness of the normal thinking process, but to the stillness of the witness mind. This aspect of our mind is full of spaciousness and clarity. Yoga performed in an absent minded way will perhaps improve our circulation, build and lengthen muscle, but it will not guide us inward to realise the Self.

Downward Facing Dog asks us to commit to the transformational practise of yoga. Make no mistake about it, this is a powerful pose. This asana can help us experience a deep stillness even while physically working strongly.

Downward Facing Dog pose can very well be called the 'whole body' pose. It provides the opportunity to fully commit our body into the process of yoga asana, and to realise the interconnectedness of all the various parts of our being.

Downward Facing Dog has aspects of a forward bend, a standing pose, and an inversion. This asana is a main component of Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation). Down Dog pose can be adapted for a student with tight hamstrings as well as for the more flexible. It is one of the mainstays of asana practice. You can practise it everyday for many years and still experience its freshness. Therapeutically, this pose can strengthen key postural muscles and open areas that restrict freedom of movement. It has a rejuvenate effect as it relieves pressure in the abdominal organs and draws blood into the brain.

**<variation 1. easy dog pose>**

This is an excellent variation for beginners. It teaches the dynamic lengthening of the spine that Down Dog requires, yet is easier as pressure is taken off the hamstrings. There is a deep fold in the hip joints that assists in the lifting of the sitting bones. This will have the effect of lengthening through the lumbar spine which then allows the thoracic vertebra to extend. Pressure will be reduced on the shoulders and wrists as we energetically lift away from the floor.



- Begin on all fours. Breathe in deeply and, as you begin your exhalation, move the sitting bones back and up as the knees lift off the floor. Keep the knees bent with the heels lifted as you finish your exhalation.
- Breathe in, broadening the shoulders side to side while pressing the inner hands down into the mat.
- Release the head down as you exhale, gazing between the feet.
- Now, as you inhale, feel the sides of your abdomen from lower ribcage to pelvic rim lengthening away from the arms. The sitting bones move back and up with your exhalation.
- Maintain a smooth steady breath feeling the deep fold at your front hips and the dynamic lifting of the sitting bones. Sustain for 3 – 10 breaths. Then rest in Balasana (Child's pose).

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**<variation 2. heel press dog pose>**

This is an excellent variation to lengthen the hamstrings and strengthen the quadriceps muscles. As this new awareness and length/strength becomes imprinted in your body, the spine will begin to feel lighter and your whole body/mind will feel interconnected.



- Rise up into Easy Dog pose, emphasising the length in the spine. Maintain an even line from wrists to sitting bones. Remember to keep your head down.
- As you exhale, slowly begin pressing the right heel towards the floor. Observe that as the hamstrings lengthen the quadriceps contract. Don't force the heel to touch the floor, just feel the centre of the heel moving down.
- Inhale and lift the heel bending the right knee.
- Now, as you exhale, begin pressing the left heel towards the floor straightening the left knee.
- Continue moving from one side to the other in perfect synchronisation with the breath. After a few repetitions, come down and rest in Balasana (Child's pose). Then come up again, and now allow one heel to move toward the floor for a few cycles of breath before changing sides.

**[main benefits]**

- Elongates spinal column.
- Realigns spinal vertebrae.
- Strengthens arms, shoulders and back.
- Tones front of legs, which can help with knee stability.
- Lengthens back of legs and opens the chest.
- Abdominal organs are inverted which may help digestion.
- Strengthens diaphragm, improving respiration.
- Balances nervous system (sympathetic and parasympathetic).
- Deeply rejuvenates the brain.

**[contraindications]**

- Students with wrist injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Students with glaucoma or detached retina.
- Menstruating women should not hold the pose for a long duration.
- Students with any recent spinal injuries especially those involving the discs.
- Be cautious with high blood pressure – consult your doctor.
- Be cautious with shoulder joint injuries – consult your doctor.

## Adho Mukha Svanasana

You will notice that as you incorporate more relaxation, both in your attitude and in our practise, a sense of ease will naturally seep out into all aspects of your life.

## &lt;variation 3. elevated heels dog pose&gt;

This variation brings awareness of how the use of the legs creates more space throughout the belly and spine.

- Ascend into Easy Dog pose. Press the hands evenly into the floor, actively lengthening upward through the arms, shoulders, and spine.
- Feel the abdomen, sides of waist and lumbar spine all evenly stretching as you slowly begin straightening the legs.
- Keep your heels up, with the weight spread evenly throughout the balls of the feet.
- Feel your sitting bones lifting upwards as the apex of the asana.
- Feel the strong contraction of the quadriceps as the knees straighten. Now, begin pressing your thighbone's back and



upward, creating more space between your belly and your thighs.

- Wrap your awareness around the entire mid section feeling the extra opening.
- Hold for 5-10 breaths then come down and rest in Balasana (Child's pose), or move directly into the completed version explained below.

## &lt;downward facing dog pose&gt;

For the completed version of this asana, you will need to make use of all the instructions so far. The breath is a key factor in opening the body and drawing awareness into the wholeness of the pose. Don't get bogged down by the details. As you read these words, visualise the actions in your own body. Then practise to deeply embody the teachings, rather than to only intellectualise the instructions.

**Hands, Wrists and Shoulders**

- Begin on all fours with your arms forward in a diagonal line from the shoulders. Place your knees hip width apart with the toes tucked under. Your hands will be at least shoulder width apart.
- Trace a line from the centre of your shoulders to the middle finger on each hand. If you have restriction in the chest or shoulders, you may have to practise with the hands slightly wider apart. Spread the fingers apart to broaden the hands. Transfer the weight around the entire rim of the palms. Also, press from wrists through the roots of each finger to the finger tips to take pressure off the wrists.

- Now, feel as if you were gently pulling the floor apart between the hands. Notice your chest and shoulders broaden laterally. Feel your outer shoulders roll open to the sides (externally rotating the shoulders). If you overdo this action, it will lift the thumbs and index fingers off the floor.
- Take the forearms and roll them in (pronation), firmly planting the ball of the thumb and index fingers onto the mat. Feel the secure support of shoulders and arms.
- Breathe in, and as you begin the exhalation, lift the knees off the floor. Continue to activate the arms and shoulders as explained above. Feel the inner arms lengthen as the arms straighten. Feel this lengthening effect travelling up through the shoulder joints lifting them up and out of the hands. Ideally, through the action of the hands and arms, there is no sagging or pinching in the shoulder joints. If you feel compression, try lifting the armpits up higher from the floor.

**Ribs, Spine and Sitting Bones**

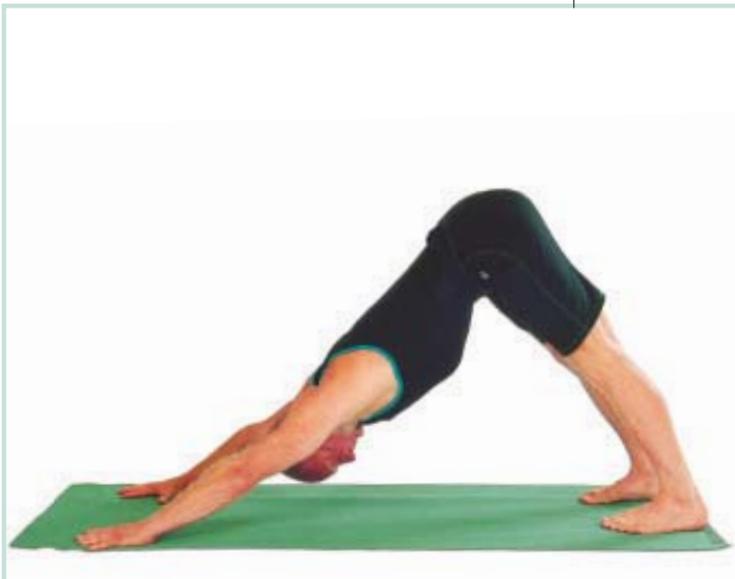
- As you inhale, begin to feel the ribcage lengthening upward and away from the hands. This action will take weight off the wrists. Feel the torso three dimensionally -

front, sides and back, all evenly elevating and opening away from the floor.

- As you exhale, draw in the lower belly and lift the sitting bones. Visualise them being the highest point of your lift.
- For the time being, keep the knees slightly bent with the heels off the floor, to give full awareness to spinal length.
- Place your mind into the core of the spine feeling each vertebra lifting up and away from the one below it. Breathe vertical space within the spinal axis.
- Exhaling, release the head down, lengthening the back of the neck. With relaxed eyes, focus your gaze between the feet.

**Awakening the Mid Section**

- Bring your inner eye to the area between the lower ribs and the pelvic rim. This will include the lumbar spine, sides of waist and abdomen.
- To awaken this area, keep the knees bent as you exhale and swivel on the balls of the feet turning your heels to the right. This will create a side bend to the spine. The left waistline will be stretching while the right will be shortening. Inhale the heels to the



## Downward Facing Dog

### Challenges and Solutions

**Challenge:** Students with tight calf muscles will have a challenge pressing the heels close to the floor.

**Solution:** Poses such as Virabhadrasana 1 (Sky Warrior) which move the back heel down towards the floor are very effective to lengthen the calves. The knee will need to be straight in order to stretch the gastrocnemius (a part of the calf) muscle, which attaches above the posterior knee. In order to fully straighten the leg, the quadriceps at the front thigh (knee extenders) will need to be strong. To strengthen the quadriceps, Setu Bandhasana (Bridge pose) is effective. In Bridge pose, be sure to keep the knees the same distance apart as the feet. Practising all your straight leg poses concentrating on contracting front thighs, will also tone the quadriceps.

**Challenge:** If the hamstrings are tight it will be difficult to lift the sitting bones, tilt the pelvis forward and lengthen the entire axis of the spine. Weak quadriceps will have a direct effect on hamstring length, as these muscles oppose each other.

**Solution:** After warming up to increase circulation and heat the musculature, practise Supta Padangusthasana (Supine leg stretch pose). Also, see description for Heel Press Down Dog (photo # 2)

**Challenge:** Tight shoulders will affect your ability to lengthen fully through the upper torso and arms. Restrictions in the pectorals (chest muscles) as well as the latissimus dorsi will prevent the arms from straightening overhead and contribute to a rounded upper back. This will impinge on your breathing. Weak lower and tight upper trapezius muscles will also round the upper back preventing full spinal extension.

**Solution:** Interlace the fingers and exhaling press the palms forward straightening the arms. As you inhale lift the arms straight up alongside the ears pressing the palms, with fingers interlaced, dynamically upward. As you exhale, keep the arms stretched up and release the shoulder blades down the back. Hold for three breaths before exhaling arms down by the sides. Repeat 3 - 7 times. Also Gomukhasana (Cow Face pose) helps to open up the shoulders.

centre and then exhaling turn the heels to the left. Deeply feel the aliveness of the entire mid section. In many practitioners, this area tends to be asleep. I find this flowing variation works wonders to switch on this area. Move from side to side 3 or 4 times before coming back to the centre.

- Now, inhale and actively lift and spread apart the sitting bones. Feel the femur (thigh) bones drawing back away from the head. This will help to increase the opening through the abdomen, waist and lumbar spine.

### Legs

- Maintaining the strong, yet sensitive lift from the hands to the sitting bones, begin straightening the legs and pressing the heels in the direction of the floor. Remember that the feet are hip width apart and parallel.
- If you are practising with straight legs, contract the quadriceps muscles at the front thigh to lift the knees up and assist in the lengthening of the hamstrings and calf muscles. Feel the knees secure as they are surrounded by supportive musculature.
- If your heels are on the floor, you can try lifting the toes up to engage the shin muscles to help lengthen the calves.
- Feel the front of the legs pulling upward toward the hip sockets while the back of legs lengthens downward towards the heels.
- Be strong, yet also sensitive, as the back of legs stretch.

### HIP AND LEG VARIATION

To add variety and deepen the awakening in the lower belly, try this version.

- With feet hip width apart, turn your heels slightly out to the sides, internally rotating the hips.
- Make sure the rotation originates in the hips (internal hip rotators) and not the knee joints.
- Feel the musculature of the outer hips wrapping around to the front and drawing in towards the midline between the legs. Now feel the inner thighs drawing back behind you.
- Place your awareness into your lower belly feeling a lifting action as a result of the inward thigh rotation. Notice how this movement supports the lumbar spine and brings life to the belly.
- Breathe here for a few breaths before turning feet back to parallel.
- You should not feel an excess of sensation behind the knees in this variation.

### Be Here Now

Now, maintain a smooth steady flow of breath and spread your awareness to all parts of your body. Let your awareness touch all the different parts of your body to reawaken any sleepy parts. Breathe life-giving prana into every cell purifying and nourishing your body and mind. Feel all the individual parts united into a harmonious dance of life. As you hold the asana breathing steadily, can you begin to sense an underlying stillness deep within? Surrender to this stillness, encouraging it to spread out to infuse mind and body. Silently offer any restlessness into this all encompassing peace. The fluctuations of the mind and emotions, the nervous movements of the body, all subside in this expanding stream of calmness. *This is asana.*

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**Challenge:** For those of you who are very flexible, it will be important that you do not over flex the shoulder joints or hyperextend the lumbar spine. The ligaments in the shoulder joints may become adversely affected. The muscles of the lumbar spine may become chronically shortened and the intervertebral discs and facet joints will be stressed.

**Solution:** When practising Downward Facing Dog pose, emphasise a clear straight line from wrists to elbows to shoulders, and then equally through the sides of the spine and out through the sitting bones. If you tend to allow the armpits to sag towards the floor, counter this by lifting them up until there is no pinching in the top of the shoulders. If you compress down into the lumbar spine (hyper lordosis/swayback), you need to draw up through the belly to bring the lumbar area back to balance. Another way to think of this is from the orientation of the pelvis. Too much anterior tilt (perhaps caused by very flexible hamstrings) can cause a swayback, so it is advised that you posteriorly tilt the pelvis until the lumbar can be lengthened and not compressed.

Remember to always breathe smoothly through all your movements and poses. This will go a long way to helping you to focus the energy and to release deeply.

## Conclusion

According to Paramhansa Yogananda, one of the primary physiological methods for gaining self mastery is to learn how to remove physical restlessness by skeletal, muscular, and nervous discipline. Practising asanas with deep awareness is an excellent vehicle for educating ourselves in this art of relaxation. When we consciously place our body in a pose, we move the skeleton through muscular action, directed by the nervous system. The central nervous system, brain and spinal cord, connect all the way out through the peripheral nerves to the skin. Through this link, we can turn up the nerve/prana flow of an asana, as well as quieting and internalising energy. In essence, we become masters of our energy, no longer a victim to the world's ceaseless demands.

Relaxation is a major aspect of yoga practice. Perhaps in our enthusiasm to accomplish the outer form of the physical techniques, we get carried away and neglect to relax, surrender and feel deeply. You will notice that as you incorporate more relaxation, both in your attitude and in our

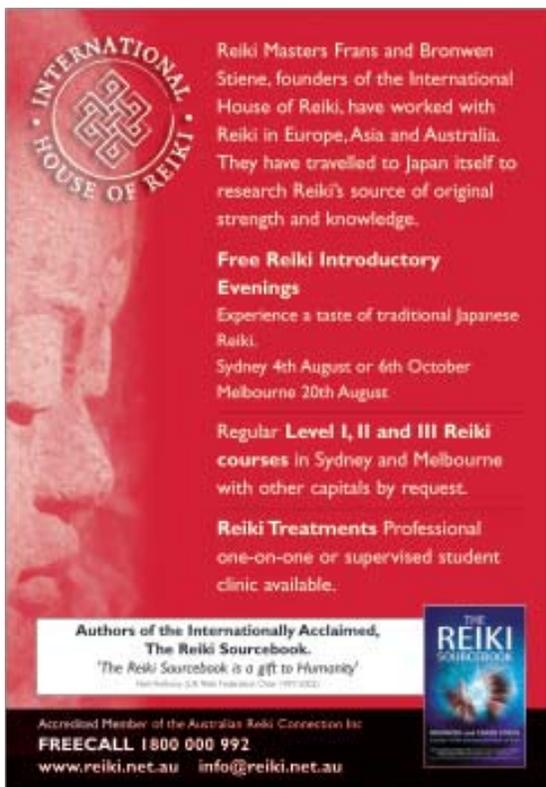
practise, a sense of ease will naturally seep out into all aspects of your life. You will be less apt to react, and more able to respond with serenity and clarity in all situations.

## Here are three ideas to assist you:

1. In a pose, soften your attitude and allow your awareness to flow out to fill the shape of the body.
2. Take the time to pause and feel after some of the asanas.
3. Be sure to consciously relax in Savasana (Corpse pose) after your session.

We have been given a great gift. Yoga is a blessing that has the power to profoundly open us to the joy of being alive. Dedication to the deep practise of yoga will reveal the inherent peace and bliss of our Self.

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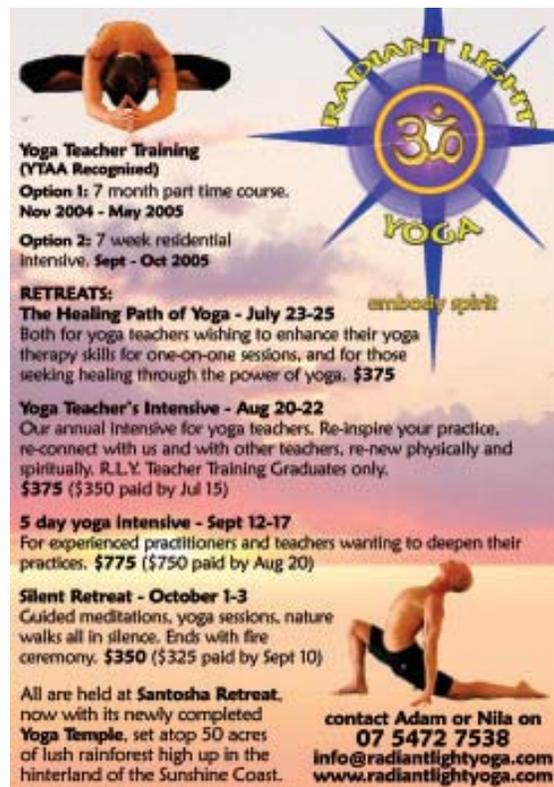
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