

Baddha Konasana

Bound angle pose

By Adam Bornstein

An invitation to be immersed in stillness.

The practice of Baddha Konasana offers a tangible experience of Patanjali's description of asana. In his second chapter of the *Yoga Sutras*, sutra 46 reads "sthira sukham asanam". This translates as "asana is a balance of steadiness and easefulness". Patanjali goes on to say that asana creates a lessening of restlessness and guides one into an identification with that which is infinite.

Baddha Konasana is an excellent pose that teaches the yogic art of dissolving restlessness in order to embrace the stillness of our boundless Self. The discipline it takes to unveil our inner tranquility is well worth the effort. It is important to balance the self-effort required with a healthy dose of sensitivity. When approaching this pose there are important alignment points to

consider. It is also essential that you adapt the asana to your individual needs. Through enduring practice and the right use of technique, an inner sense of easefulness will be revealed. This will expand to fill you as you explore the deeper aspects of the pose.

Initially, the focus is on aligning the different component parts of the pose. Then we feel the relationship between all the parts, how they interrelate and fit together. At this point the life-force can flow freely through the body. We begin to truly embody asana and experience unity and wholeness. The root of the word asana means 'to stay' or 'to be'. This implies an inward state of being still. The journey from outer to inner, from separation to completeness, is the real path. Whether or not the knees press into the floor is not the main issue.

A very important reason why the originators of yoga practised asana, was to train the body to sit absolutely still so that meditation could be pursued without physical distractions. One of the main benefits of Baddha Konasana is how it prepares us for meditation. Physically, it opens the hips and strengthens the back to enable us to sit steadily and with ease. Energetically, it encourages smooth breathing thereby unifying our internal energies. Mentally, it centres the mind and develops concentration. You may find that you naturally slip into meditation through practising this asana.

[Getting started]



Practise a few warm-ups to prepare the body and mind.

Recommended asanas:

- Surya Namaskar – Sun Salutation
- Virabhadrasana – Warrior poses
- Thread the needle pose
- Purvottanasana – Reverse plank pose

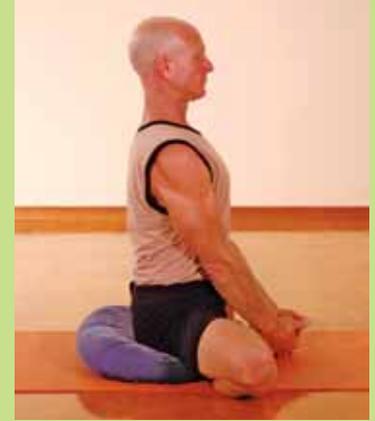
The idea is to warm the musculoskeletal system and to activate a clear connection between mind and body. The photo above shows a variation of Urdhva Mukha Upavistha Konasana (Upward-facing wide-angle pose). It is a highly effective preparatory pose that will open the inner legs. Use the bolsters if needed to support the hips and legs. Sustain for 30 seconds to start. Gradually increase to five minutes to facilitate permanent change in the muscle fascia.

[Using Props]

The use of props can be very helpful for spinal alignment and to protect the joints of the spine, pelvis and legs.

Prop 1: Support for spinal curves.

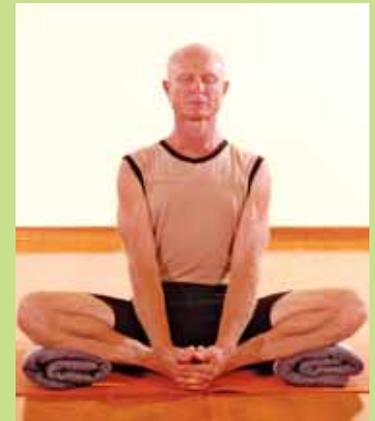
If your back muscles are weak and your legs are tight, practising with a lift under the sitting bones will assist in maintaining the natural spinal curves. In this way, you will be strengthening the spine in good alignment. In your yoga practice, be sure to include poses to lengthen the hamstrings and strengthen the iliopsoas muscles.



Place a cushion or folded blanket under the sitting bones. Sit on the front edge of the prop to encourage the upper pelvis to rock forward to re-establish the lumbar curve. Look for balance; too much tilt will compress the lumbar spine, while too little will reverse the lumbar curve and create a compressive fold in the belly inhibiting the flow of breath.

Prop 2: Sacroiliac, hip joint and knee support.

If you have any dysfunction in any of these joints, place folded blankets under the upper outer thighs close in by the hip joints and forward under the outer lower legs. This will prevent any strain in these areas and make this asana therapeutic, as it will increase circulation and healing without the risk of furthering any existing problems.



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[Guidelines for practice]

Stay clear of pain

Before beginning, honestly assess the state of your knees, sacroiliac joints and lumbar spine. Consult an experienced teacher if you have injuries and are unsure about the safety of this pose for your body. Begin with the variations using the props as indicated. Move slowly and mindfully into the pose. By going slow you will not only avoid pain and injuries, you will open the door into the heart of the pose: the dissolving of any tendency towards restlessness.

Practise from the inside out

Do not impose the posture from the outside; let the asana emerge from within you. Feel the breath-inspired asana like a magnet drawing your energy and consciousness within. Try the pose with closed eyes. With the two physical eyes shut, open your inner eye of awareness and feel the pose from the inside out. Invite the pose to be expressed through your body and mind.

Be process oriented (not goal oriented)

While practising, let go of any outward goal of forcing the knees flat to the floor. In the beginning especially, there is some effort needed to create the action of moving the knees towards the floor, but the focus will be on the journey. The perfect pose is a state of being; of aligning your body, breath and awareness into a harmonious union. Stay connected to each breath, each subtle release, one moment offering itself into the next. Apply yourself with an attitude of moment-to-moment acceptance.

[Lessons in anatomy]

1. The spine

One of the greatest benefits of this asana is the strengthening of the back muscles. We want to strengthen the spine with the natural spinal curves in good alignment. Bad postural habits will be perpetuated if we slouch while sustaining the pose. Visualise the intervertebral discs between each spinal segment. By lifting up through the spine, feel that you are creating space so the discs are able to expand along their full height and breadth. There are deep and intermediate back muscles that help to maintain a well aligned posture. These muscles may need retraining. This asana can help in this educational process. It will be important to proceed step by step. Challenge your strength but always within safe perimeters.

Experiment

Practise Baddha Konasana with your back against the wall. Move the flesh back from the sitting bones to start. Place the back of the pelvis, spine and skull at the wall and open your legs into an easy-does-it variation of the pose. Notice which parts of your back body are touching the wall and which parts are not. Ideally the sacrum, thoracic spine and the back of the skull touch the wall and the lumbar and cervical spine have a slight curve away from the wall. As a reference, take a flat hand between the wall and the lumbar and then the wall and cervical spine. Generally speaking you should be able to slide the flat hand in the space between the wall and these parts of the back. If you collapse the lumbar into the

wall, it could be indicative that your iliopsoas muscles are weak (they help to establish the lumbar curve) and/or your hamstrings are tight. Practising with a prop under the sitting bones will be the right starting point for you as it helps to maintain healthy spinal curves.

2. Muscles in partnership

When a set of muscles on one side of a joint receives a nerve impulse they contract and shorten. As the contraction takes place the muscles at their tendinous attachments pull on the bones to create movement. The muscles on the other side of the joint need to release and lengthen to allow the contracting muscles to do their work of moving the bones. We need both these elements to move the joints of the body. This synergy is aligned with the yogic principles of balance: strength and flexibility; action and relaxation; stability and easefulness; power and peace. In the case of Baddha Konasana, the deep gluteal lateral hip rotators move the femur bones while the inner thigh adductors release to allow the movement. Some practitioners focus only on the inner thighs stretching, imagining that the adductors are pushing the knees open. For some, this can lead to knee injury.

Experiment

While in the pose, place your awareness on the deep gluteal area where the hip rotators are located. They will be the driving power to open and rotate the thighbones. With a focused and loving use of your will, send the nerve impulses into the rotators to contract, thereby

initiating opening the thighs to the sides and back towards the floor. As these muscles originate on the sacrum and pelvis and insert on the upper back thighbone you can easily visualise how they move the bones. Apply the contractive force slowly and steadily. Do not bounce. Simultaneously allow the inner thigh adductors to release. Observe the effects. Maintain clear awareness with steady consistent breathing. Be in absolutely no hurry. When the muscles get fatigued, draw the knees up and wrap your arms around them.

[Benefits]

- Excellent as preparation for seated meditation poses.
- Strengthens the spinal muscles to be able to sit upright with ease.
- Opens the hips through a combination of strengthening lateral hip rotators and releasing inner thigh adductors.
- Cultivates an attitude of internal absorption.
- Deepens the breath.
- Improves posture.
- Can reduce or eliminate the pain of menstrual cramping.
- Develops concentration.
- Unifies the mind with the body.

Contraindications

- Knee injuries, particularly those involving menisci or ligaments.
- Bulging or herniated lumbar discs.
- Sacroiliac joint ligament sprain.

[Practising Baddha Konasana step by step]



- Sit on a yoga mat or a blanket in Dandasana (Staff pose). Bend one knee at a time towards the chest and place the feet on the floor. Wrap your arms around the knees and as you inhale draw them in and rock up onto the sitting bones. Lengthen all the way up through the crown of the head as you draw the breath in. Keep the spine lengthening upward, and begin exhaling smoothly, opening the knees out to the sides. Another helpful technique is to reach back with the hands and draw the flesh back from the sitting bones. This will shift your weight onto the sitting bones and facilitate a dynamic upward lift to the spine. In addition, it will create space in the hip joints. This spacious lift will support two essential alignment points:

1. The front pelvis and entire spine lifted up towards vertical.
2. The thighbones lengthening out of the hip sockets.

- Now, hold the ankles and slide the heels closer in towards the pelvis.

Either maintain the hold on the ankles or interlace the fingers under the front part of the feet towards the toes. Do not aggressively pull up on the feet. This can compress the inner ankles and knees. Press the soles of the feet together, including the ball of the feet and the centre of heels. If you have any knee sensitivity, dynamically maintain pressing the ball of the big toes together throughout the duration of the pose. This will help to keep the knees safe. Resist any temptation to force the knees to the floor. Stay present and attentive.

- Draw the chin slightly down for the first few breaths. As you inhale and

ascend upward through the spine, feel the length travel all the way up the back body and through the neck. Feel how this action helps to create more length through the back. Then, without sacrificing your spinal length, draw the chin in towards the throat and slightly up bringing it level to the floor. The idea is to equally carry the axial extension through the front, back and sides of the spine. Focus on the torso like a cylinder ascending from the foundation of the pelvis.

- Continuing the lift through the spinal axis, begin to lengthen the thighbones outward from the hip sockets. Feel this action derive from the ascension of the spine and the space within the hips. As the core of the femurs is lengthening out towards the knees, begin activating the hip rotators located deep within the lower gluteal region. You will feel these muscles contracting as they draw the femurs back into external rotation. Attune to the feeling of the femurs gracefully lengthening and turning within the hip sockets. Focus this action in the hips and not in the knees. The other half of this equation is that the inner thigh adductor group of muscles will need to release and lengthen to permit the action of the rotators to do their job.
- Throughout this balancing of contraction and release, maintain the power of the iliopsoas muscles to keep you on the sitting bones and not rolled back onto the buttocks. Continue to emphasise the pelvic rim moving evenly forward and upward.
- On your exhalations, re-anchor through the foundation of the sitting bones. Feel them spread roots down and around you. As you do this, roll

your inner thighs down towards the floor. As the weight shifts towards the front edge of the sitting bones you will feel the lumbar spine move smoothly into its natural concave position. Do not overdo this action; you will feel compression if you do. Look for balance in the mid-section. Too much pelvic tilt will compress the posterior lumbar spine; too little will compress the anterior lumbar and the belly thereby inhibiting the breath.

- On your exhalations, maintain the spinal ascension and slide the shoulder blades down the back. There will be some muscular action involved with this in the space between the lower shoulder blades. Come back to inhaling and internally lifting up through each vertebra. Feel the spine between the shoulder blades lift up towards the chest. In response, the chest lifts and the collarbones broaden. The shoulder blades respond on the exhalations by gliding down the back. Create a loop: Inhale and ascend upward through the spine, into the chest, up to the tops of the shoulder. Exhale, draw the shoulder blades down and send the exhaling current all the way back down to the earth through the sitting bones.
- Start with the inner elbows facing each other to broaden the upper back and chest. Then experiment with turning the inner elbows and biceps slightly forward. Notice the response in the chest. Perhaps you feel a blossoming of the heart from the breastbone to the outer edges of the shoulders.
- Now deepen and lengthen the breath integrating all these instructions and embody stability and lightness. The breath is a vital aspect of the pose: Use it to create your initial alignment; use it to maintain your pose; use it to crack open the outer shell of the pose and experience the vastness inside yourself.
- Sustain the pose for 30 seconds to five minutes. When the breath wavers or the quality of awareness diminishes begin to slowly exit the asana.



Counterpose

After completing the pose, draw the thighs together and squeeze the knees in towards the chest. Then step the feet forward hip-width apart and place the palms by your sides with fingers turned back. Inhaling, lift up into Purvottanasana. Start with the chin at the chest then slowly take the head back. For extra stabilisation for the pelvis and spine, an option is to squeeze a block between the thighs. Release down after a few breaths. Either sit in a meditative cross legged asana or lie down in Shavasana (Relaxation pose) to savour the after effects.

Conclusion

Baddha Konasana, when practised consistently and with awareness, has the power to slow down the perception of time. When this happens, the mind's busyness, a major cause of stress and strife, has the chance to unravel. A meditative state of mind is the natural outcome.

The slowing of our internal clock offers the opportunity for valuable introspection. That which is behind the scenes of our daily existence, driving us unconsciously, is ushered into our awareness. From this place of recognition, we can let the superficial simply drop away. In doing so, another door opens into being truly awake and present to the beauty within and around us.

Sitting in the seat of the observer, detaching from compulsions and likes and dislikes, we become purified of restlessness, moods and fears. With the space created, we can realise a deeper aspect of our reality. Emerging from deep within our heart of hearts, our inner divine nature of completeness and joy comes bubbling up. May we open to it, become saturated with it and live in its embrace.



Adam and his partner Akash are the founders of Radiant Light Yoga. They began their study and practise of yoga in 1980 and have been teaching since 1982. This year marks their tenth year of training yoga teachers in Australia. Visit their website at www.radiantlightyoga.com for more information and contact details.

With respect and love, Adam thanks all his teachers over the years, especially Paramahansa Yogananda whose teachings continue to guide and inspire his life and service through yoga.