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Yoga Training

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Sun Salutations/Surya Namaskar

The Sun Salutation is a series of twelve poses, flowing in one graceful, continued movement. Traditionally, this exercise is performed twelve times before moving into other asanas. In performing the sun salutation, we ask the light and energy to unfold within us. In order to understand the importance of the Sun Salutation series, one must understand the history of the sequence, the significance within the Hindi culture, the importance of Hatha yoga within the tradition, as well as how to perform all twelve positions within the series correctly.

The Sun Salutation is an excellent warm up. It stretches and limbers the spine and limbs. Inhaling in one position, and exhaling as you go into the next, retaining the breath in the fifth pose. It is important that in position three through ten the hands remain in the same place. This sets the proper mood of inner and outer harmony. It is essential to the true practice and goal of Hatha Yoga. It is important to relax body completely before beginning asanas.

More than 2500 years ago, the Hindus believed the sun, which they call Surya, was both the physical & spiritual heart of our world as well as the creator of life itself. The sun is the eye of the world. One means of honoring the sun is through a series of dynamic Asana sequences.

The first of the sun sequences originates from Northern India, predominately from the foothills of the northern Himalayas. The movements are simple and gentle. The actions and stretches are designed to awaken and open the body. The initial action of drawing the palms of the hands together into prayer position indicates and establishes the quality of the form. Interestingly, it is no coincidence that every major religion uses this gesture with various rituals and ceremonies. The simple act of pressing together one's palms balances the left and right hemispheres of the brain. It establishes an attitude of inner quiet.

When we sleep, our body lies in an inactive condition. During sleep, the conscious mind ceases to function, metabolic rate decreases, circulation of body fluids slows, and the rest of the body functions reduce. When awake, our mind must transition from inactive to active. The Sun Salutation aids in this by

massaging and stimulating glands, organs, muscles, and nerves. Breath increases, bringing more oxygen into the lungs and quickening the heart rate.

There is a great inherent power that comes from synchronizing the breath with movement. With awareness of breath comes an understanding of the nature of physical, emotional, and psychological conditioning. Our weaknesses, imbalances, and hidden tensions are brought to awareness for inspection. Paying close attention, our body is reawakened.

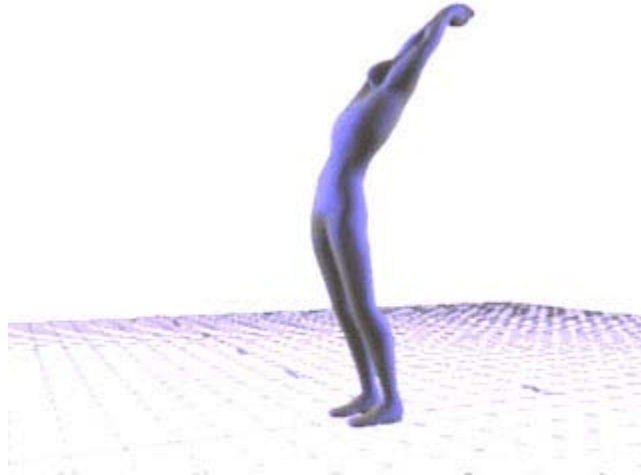
Structured in rhythm and fluency, the Sun Salutation reveals many dimensions of experience that help us move to knowledge and practical wisdom. Through the Sun Salutation, we begin to uncover ourselves. We discover the strength and an awareness that opens the door to our true potential.

Through breath our body is stimulated, enlivened, and refreshed. The inner order is reestablished. The technique that is employed is called Ujjayi breathing, meaning an upward surge of power. It encourages and promotes deep absorption of vital energy into the blood stream and increases the condition of the whole organism. The breath also provides elevated capacity for living.

Positions:



Tadasana (mountain pose): EXHALE Stand firmly with head, neck, and trunk in a straight line. Rooted base and crown reaching for the heavens. Feel your weight distributed evenly. Shoulders are down, stomach slightly hugging the ribs, legs are grounded, palms are in prayer position in front of the heart. Keep a slight focus on mid distance. Concentrate on the breath and mentally repeat a short positive affirmation. Make sure each movement is mindful and precise as possible. Keep in mind, nothing can be built on a shaky foundation. When we draw the hands together we feel a natural softening and humility from the gesture. Great care and attention are needed to ensure the breath remains smooth and even throughout the movement.



2) Vrddhasana (back bending): INHALE Follow gaze on fingertips as you stretch arms up and back to their fullest as you begin to arch backwards. Look to the center of your forehead as the head extends back to increase the opening of the chest. Draw the spine into the body, and fully expand the rib cage. Root awareness in the feet and legs to anchor the movement. The degree and extent of the arch backward is governed by the length of the inhalation. The split second that the inhalation reaches its summit is the point when you begin exhaling into the next posture. Keep a firm grip of the lower abdominal muscles. The end of each exhalation, increases the release of the stale energy from the body, and provides space for a deeper inhalation. It also deepens the ability to stretch further into each posture.



3) Uttanasana (forward bend): EXHALE Bend forward from the hips while keeping the back and legs straight and the arms next to the ears. Placing your hands on the ground next to your feet. Bring your head to your knees. Note: If you cannot place the hands on the floor without bending the legs, then lower only as far as possible without straining.



4) Anjaneyasana (low lunge): INHALE Step as far back as you can with your left leg. At the same time, bend the right leg and drop the hip while lifting up your trunk. Try to straighten the back leg as much as you can. Come on to fingertips, or have hands flat next to foot. Use the arms to broaden the chest by rolling back the shoulders. Extend your neck back, and draw spine in and up. Direct your gaze to the center of your forehead. Note: On returning from downward dog, attention should be fixed on carrying the leg softly toward the hands. Your foot should reach the floor quietly.

5) Chaturanga Dandasanna(plank): RETAIN This is the only position in which the breath is held. Curl the toes of the right foot, extend the left leg placing it next to the right. Arms remain straight, and the body forms an inclined plane from the head to the feet. Keep the legs and arms active and alive and the eyes soft, gazing into mid distance. The duration of this action should be no more than four or five seconds.



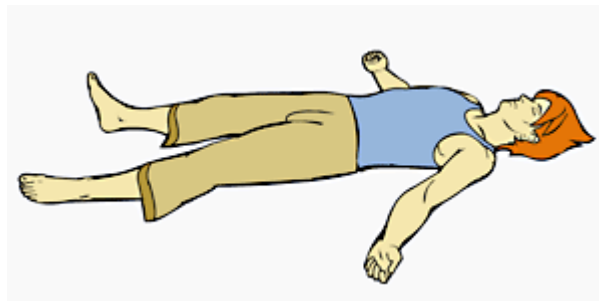
6) Ashtanga (knees, chest, and chin): EXHALE Drop first the knees, then the chest to the floor. While keeping the tips of the fingers in line with the breast, tuck in the chin and place your forehead on the floor. In this position, only the toes, knees, hands, chest, and forehead touch the floor. The nose does not touch the floor. The elbows remain close to the body.



7) Bhujangasana(cobra): INHALE Without moving the hands and forehead, relax the legs and extend the feet so that the body rests flat on the floor. Inhale as you slowly raise your head. First, touch the nose and then the chin to the floor. Then, stretch your head forward and upward without using the strength of the arm or hands. Slowly raise the shoulders and chest. Look up and bend back as far as possible. In this posture, the navel remains on the floor. Use the muscles of the back only. Do not use the arms or hands to push your body off of the floor. Use them to balance your body. Keep the feet and legs together, and relaxed.



8) Adho Mukha Svanasana(downward dog): EXHALE Roll down and back over the toes, while keeping both legs and arms straight. Begin to elevate the buttocks and hips. Encourage the heels to meet the floor, and at the same time carry the trunk toward the thighs. Keep your feet hipwidth apart with your hands slightly wider than the shoulders. Pay attention to the pressure supplied by fingertips. The strength from the hands and feet manufacture the upward lift. Draw the chin to the breast bone, and look toward the navel. Now, repeat positions 4, 3, 2, and 1.



Upon completion of the Sun Salutation, you want to reach a state of true relaxation found in Savasana (corpse pose). Depending on one's abilities, these positions could be relatively easy or advanced. The challenge of completely relieving the tension from every part of the body and mind is perhaps the greatest test of the Yogi.

Although corpse is practiced lying on the floor, it is a posture first and foremost. By paying attention to correct alignment of the body, you are creating a "mold". In time, your body and mind will be encouraged to derive maximum benefits of the practice.

Make sure the trunk is lengthened, and the arms and legs are not touching the body. Open the lower back. Each vertebrae is opened individually. This action releases and broadens the shoulders. Next, take a deep breath. Press the hands into the earth, while squeezing the feet, legs, and whole body into the earth. Exhale, release palms face upward, and feet fall away. Keep the breath sensitive, subtle and automatic. Direct the initial point of focus to the heaviness of the back of the body. Let gravity absorb negative stale energy. Lighten and lift the forehead and let the two hemispheres of the brain separate and open. The muscles of the face release. Then, simply attend to various aspects of the

body. From the feet, allow the mind to move slowly upward. The whole body/mind is bathed in a golden glow of its own awareness.

Due to powerful impact, it is important that arousal of body/mind is done with care and attention. Begin moving fingers and toes. This slight action echoes throughout the body and mind. Next, rotate ankles and wrists. This stimulates the legs, arms, and spine. As muscle, bone, ligaments and tendons resume their function, the rest of the body opens and expresses itself.

Roll and rest on your right side for a minute or two. This ensures that pressure is not placed on the heart wall, and it also gently stimulates the body. The trick is how to use this relaxation tool in everyday life. It cuts through the external layers, and into the essence of being. It is always there, just take the time to look.