

The Principles of Sequencing

Our guide will help you keep it straight plan your classes with intelligence and skill.

By Donald Moyer

Perhaps you have taken a series of introductory yoga classes and want to make yoga a bigger part of your life. Or perhaps you want to refine your asanas. Practicing at home for even a few minutes each day will help you move more deeply into poses than one long practice each week. A home yoga practice can also be an enhancement to your life, a time you spend with yourself to nourish and revitalize. However, if you expect too much of yourself, your yoga practice may turn into another burden or chore. Before embarking on a home practice, consider carefully how much time you have available each day. Account for your working hours, household tasks, and family responsibilities, and see how you can reasonably fit a yoga practice into your life before you begin.

Skip to the Sequences:

- Sequence I -- Forward Bends
- Sequence II -- Backbends
- Sequence III -- Twists

Start simple, practicing a few minutes each day, choosing two or three of your favorite poses. When you are able to practice three times a week, for at least half an hour each time, try the basic sequences included in this article. I encourage long-term students to build their home practice to five days each week, for at least 30 minutes on three days, and at least an hour on two other days. This leaves one day a week for attending class and one day to rest the body completely.

My first yoga teacher, Penny Nield-Smith, used to say, "You're only as old as your spine!" According to yoga tradition, the vital energy of the body is housed in and protected by the spine. The sequences presented here include the most important poses for a beginner or a continuing beginner to practice and will help you develop strength and flexibility of the spine by gradually increasing your range of movement in three different ways: forward bending, backbending, and twisting. By alternating these sequences during the week, you will have a full and balanced practice.

You will notice that these basic sequences share a common structure. They begin with standing poses to warm the body, move into the focus poses (forward bends, backbends, or twists), and conclude with releasing and relaxation poses. The most basic standing poses are repeated in each sequence: Adho Mukha Svanasana, Utthita Trikonasana, Uttanasana, Utthita Parsvakonasana, Prasarita Padottanasana. These poses develop the strength of the legs and the flexibility of the hip joints. Notice that within the sequence an active standing pose like Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose) is followed by a more restful standing pose like Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend). In this way, you can maintain and conserve rather than dissipate your energy.

Each sequence also includes a more challenging standing pose, marked with an asterisk (*). If you are an absolute beginner, omit these poses from the sequence until you feel comfortable with the more basic standing poses. Use props to modify poses when necessary.

Observe how the standing poses for each sequence relate to the focus poses. In Sequence I, Parsvottanasana (Intense Intense Side Stretch Pose) and Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose) help to lengthen the hamstrings for sitting forward bends. In Sequence II, Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose) strengthens the legs, opens the chest, and gives the spine a mild preparatory backbend. In Sequence III, standing twists prepare the spine for sitting twists. In a well-planned sequence, each pose makes the next pose easier and more accessible, because it creates the opening necessary to move deeply into that pose.

Beginners who are unfamiliar with the names of poses and how to do them can consult B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* (Shoken, 1995) or *Yoga: The Iyengar Way* by Silva Mehta, Mira Mehta, & Shyam Mehta (Knopf, 1990) for more guidance.

Before You Begin

Prepare Your Space. Choose a clean, uncluttered area for your practice space, preferably with a bare floor and an accessible wall. When you practice, turn off your telephone or switch on your answering machine. Let your friends and family know this is your quiet time and you are not to be disturbed.

Props. When you set up your practice space, gather whatever props you need. These may include: a nonskid mat (if your floor is carpeted or slippery); a foam or wooden block; a 6-foot strap or belt; a folding or straight-backed chair; a blanket; and a bolster (or two blankets folded in the oblong shape of a bolster).

What to Eat. Try not to eat for at least two hours before practicing. If this is not possible, eat something light, such as fruit, at least an hour before doing yoga.

What to Wear. Wear loose clothing that does not restrict the movement of your legs and pelvis. Shorts and a T-shirt, a leotard and tights, and sweat suits are fine. Practice barefoot to enhance your balance and sensitize your feet.

Sequence I: Forward Bends

To prepare for seated forward bends, begin with standing poses that give a gentle stretch to the hamstrings, inner thighs, and outer hips. Deepen the work of the legs with a supine leg stretch like Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose). Use a strap around the foot of the raised leg if your hamstrings are tight.

Virasana (Hero Pose) helps to prepare the knee joints for seated forward bends. If your pelvis doesn't reach the floor in Virasana or if you experience discomfort in the knees, place a folded blanket or block under your sitting bones (but not under the feet). Practice the arm position from Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose) to open the shoulder joints and create mobility in the upper

spine. Tightness in the upper back can restrict your seated forward bends. If your hands don't meet in Gomukhasana, hold a strap between the hands.

In all sitting poses, place a folded blanket under the sitting bones to raise the pelvis and help you sit comfortably. If you feel any discomfort at your inner knee while practicing Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend), bring your legs closer together. If you feel discomfort in the knee in Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose) or Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose), place a folded facecloth behind the bent knee to create more space in the joint.

Janu Sirsasana and Paschimottanasana are the heart of this practice sequence, and are the most accessible forward bends for beginners. If your hamstrings are tight or if you have discomfort in your lower back, practice these seated forward bends with your hands on the seat of a chair or on upturned blocks, so that your hands are the same height from the ground as your shoulders. This will help you to elongate your spine.

Once you are in the pose, bring your awareness to the breath. Let the spine gently lengthen on the inhalation and release more deeply into the pose on the exhalation.

After seated forward bends, practice a counterpose to release your lower back, either Balasana (Child's Pose) or the supine twist recommended in the backbend sequence. If you experience any lower back discomfort or weakness during this sequence, place a rolled blanket under your knees for Savasana (Corpse Pose), allowing the lower back to release to the floor.

Sequence II: Backbends

Backbending poses require not only a flexible spine, but openness in the hip and shoulder joints and the length of the front body. The standing poses in this sequence create movement and flexibility in the hips and shoulders. Virabhadrasana I approaches a backbend position and brings length to the front thighs and lower abdomen.

The backbending segment begins with Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog), which gently arches and extends the spine. If you feel any discomfort in the lower or middle back while practicing Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, try placing your hands on blocks or a chair. If you feel any strain on the knees in Dhanurasana (Bow Pose), use a strap around the ankles and take hold of the strap a few inches from the ankles.

If you have neck problems, do not let your head drop back in Ustrasana (Camel Pose), but keep your chin tucked into your chest. If Ustrasana is difficult for you, try practicing with your hands on upturned blocks or the seat of a chair.

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) (Bridge Pose) is a useful counterpose after Ustrasana because it lengthens the back of the neck. If you feel strain on the knees in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, walk your feet further out until they are directly under your knees. Hold a strap around the ankles to give you more leverage. To stay longer in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, place an upturned block under the tailbone.

Practiced as a resting pose in this way, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana functions as a transition from

the active backbends to the winding-down poses. Practice a supine twist after backbends to release your lower back and neutralize the spine.

Backbends open the chest and are an ideal preparation for any variation of Shoulderstand, including Viparita Karani. In Viparita Karani, make sure the bolster supports your lower waist and sacrum, so that your pelvis is parallel to the floor. Supta Baddha Konasana (Supine Bound Angle Pose) with your feet on a bolster releases the lower back and the hip joints. If you have lower back problems, lie on your back with your legs up the wall instead of doing Viparita Karani and place a roll under your knees in Savasana.

Sequence III: Twists

Twisting poses are often used as transition poses to neutralize the spine after forward bends and backbends. In this sequence, we focus on twisting poses themselves to help deepen the lateral rotation of the spine. To twist the spine effectively, you must first be able to stabilize the pelvis and lengthen the spine, which is accomplished here with the basic standing poses.

Parsvottanasana then takes us halfway to Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose), by establishing the position of the feet and legs. If Parivrtta Trikonasana feels too difficult for you, try Utthita Marichyasana (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Marichi) with one knee bent and your foot on a chair or window ledge, turning towards the bent leg. If balance is a problem, practice Parivrtta Trikonasana with the support of a wall. After the standing poses, Uttanasana with arms extended onto a chair acts not only as a resting pose, but allows you to lengthen the spine once again.

Bharadvajasana II (Bharadvaja's Twist II) is a mild twist for the spine and a great shoulder opener. This pose is also a good preparation for Half Lotus (Ardha Padmasana). However, if you have knee problems, or the knees are not in contact with the floor, place the foot at the inner thigh rather than on the thigh of the opposite leg. Use a strap around the ankle, if you cannot take hold of the foot.

Marichyasana III is the quintessential twist, but the final position with the arms entwined behind the back is difficult to achieve. Here are some alternate ways of practicing the pose: If you are turning towards your right, first practice by hugging your bent leg with your left forearm. As you gain flexibility in the pose, bring your upper left arm over the bent leg, but keep your elbow bent. Eventually, when the side rib cage touches the thigh of the bent leg, you are ready to clasp the hands behind the back. In all twisting poses, work with the rhythm of the breath. Lengthen the front of the spine on the inhalation, and deepen the twist on the exhalation.

After a series of twists, practice a symmetrical pose such as Upavistha Konasana to extend the legs and realign the two sides of the body. In seated twists, there is a tendency to compress the hip joints, tense the diaphragm, and constrict the rib cage. Practice Supta Baddha Konasana (Supine Bound Angle Pose) with a bolster under the rib cage to open the chest and help release the hip joints. Leave the bolster under the rib cage when you extend your legs for Savasana or lie flat, whichever feels more comfortable.

In 30 minutes (without disruptions), you can practice any one of these series, holding the poses for the times recommended. Adjust your practice as you see fit, holding the poses longer or

repeating some of the more difficult ones for a longer practice, or eliminating the more difficult poses for a shorter session.

Words of Caution

Menstrual Cycle. Do not practice inverted poses or strenuous backbends during menstruation. Focus on forward bends and restorative poses: Supta Baddha Konasana (Supine Bound Angle Pose) with bolster (10 minutes); Supta Virasana (Supine Hero Pose) with bolster (5 minutes); Balasana (Child's Pose) with a bolster (5 minutes); and Savasana with support under knees (10 minutes).

Pregnancy. During the first trimester, all beginning poses can be practiced safely if you are in good health and have no history of miscarriages. During the second and third trimesters, backbends and forward bends should be modified to avoid either overstretching or compressing the abdomen. Concentrate on Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) and standing poses to maintain strength, and Upavistha Konasana and Baddha Konasana to encourage an easy delivery. Practice Savasana lying on your side. Consider joining a prenatal yoga class with an experienced instructor who can address your questions and concerns.

Illness and Injury. When recovering from illness or injury, consult an experienced yoga teacher and/or your health-care professional before embarking on a regular yoga practice.

Pain and Discomfort. If you experience pain or discomfort when practicing any of the poses recommended in this article, consult an experienced yoga teacher if possible. Otherwise, modify the pose by trying one of the variations or alternatives indicated. If the pain persists, eliminate the pose from your practice until you can get reliable advice.

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Sequence I (Forward Bends)

Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)	1 minute
Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand)	2 x 30 seconds
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	30 seconds
Tadasana (Mountain Pose)	30 seconds
Vrksasana (Tree Pose)	1-2 minutes
Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose)	1 minute
Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose)	1-2 minutes
Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch Pose)	1-2 minutes
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Sirsasana (Headstand)	3-5 minutes
Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand)	5-10 minutes

Eka Pada Sarvangasana (One-Legged Shouderstand)	1 minute
Parsvaika Pada Sarvangasana (One Leg to Side Shoulderstand)	1 minute
Halasana (Plow Pose)	1-2 minutes
Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend)	2 minutes
Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose)	1 minute
Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose)	2 minutes
Ardha Padma Paschimottanasana (Half-Lotus Seated Forward Bend)	2 minutes
Triang Mukhaikapada Paschimottanasana (Three-Limbed Forward Bend)	2 minutes
Marichyasana I (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Marichi, I)	2 minutes
Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend)	2 minutes
Jathara Parivartanasana (Supine Twist or Revolved Abdomen Pose)	1 minute
Savasana (Corpse Pose)	3-5 minutes
Sequence II (Backbends)	
Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)	1 minute
Tadasana (Mountain Pose)	30 seconds
Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose)	1 minute
Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose I)	1-2 minutes
Virabhadrasana III (Warrior Pose III)	1 minute
Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)	1 minute
Virasana Gomukhasana (Hero Pose with Cow Face Pose Arms)	1 minute
Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero Pose)	2-3 minutes
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	30 seconds
Sirsasana (Headstand)	3-5 minutes
Salabhasana (Locust Pose)	2 x 30 seconds
Viparita Dandasana (Inverted Staff Pose)	3 minutes
Bharadvajasana I (Bharadvaja's Twist, I)	30 seconds
Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand)	2 x 30 seconds
Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose)	2 x 30 seconds
Jathara Parivartanasana (Supine Twist or Revolved Abdomen Pose)	1 minute
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand)	3-10 minutes
Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) (Bridge Pose)	3-5 minutes
Supta Baddha Konasana (Supine Bound Angle Pose) (Supine Bound Angle Pose)	30 seconds
Balasana (Child's Pose)	1-2 minutes
Savasana (Corpse Pose)	3-5 minutes
Sequence III (Twists)	
Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)	1 minute
Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance)	2 x 30 seconds
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute

Tadasana (Mountain Pose)	30 seconds
Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend)	1 minute
Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (Revolved Side Angle Pose)	1-2 minutes
Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)	1 minute
Bharadvajasana II (Bharadvaja's Twist II)	2 x 1 minute
Virasana with arms in Gomukhasana (Hero Pose with Cow Face Pose Arms)	1 minute
Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)	30 seconds
Sirsasana (Headstand)	3-5 minutes
Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) (Bridge Pose)	1-2 minutes
Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand)	3-10 minutes
Halasana (Plow Pose)	1-3 minutes
Supta Padangusthasana (leg up) (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose)	1 minute
Supta Padangusthasana (leg to side) (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose)	1 minute
Marichyasana III (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Marichi, III)	2 x 1 minute
Ardha Matsyendrasana I (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose)	2 x 1 minute
Pasasana (Noose Pose)	2 x 1 minute
Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend)	1 minute
Supta Baddha Konasana (Supine Bound Angle Pose)	3 minutes
(Balasana (Child's Pose))	1 minute
Savasana (Corpse Pose)	3-5 minutes

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