



Yoga Teacher Training

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

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Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Standing and Balance Postures	
Mountain (Tadasana).....	3
Crescent Stretch	5
Chair (Utkatasana).....	7
Standing Backbend/Forward Fold (Uttanasana).....	9
Chest Expander Forward Fold.....	11
Down Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana).....	13
Warrior 1 (Virabhadrasana 1).....	15
Humble Warrior.....	17
Full Lunge (Alanasana).....	18
Warrior 2 (Virabhadrasana 2).....	19
Reverse Warrior.....	21
Extended Side Angle (Utthita Parsvakonasana).....	23
Triangle (Utthita Trikonasana).....	25
Half Moon (Ardha Chandrasana).....	27
Pyramid (Parsvottanasana).....	30
Revolved Triangle (Parivrtta Trikonasana).....	32
Tree, Toppling Tree (Vrksasana).....	33
Eagle (Garudasana).....	36
King Dancer (Natarajasana).....	38
Standing Hand To Foot (Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana).....	40
Warrior 3 (Virabhadrasana 3).....	42
One Leg Forward Fold.....	43
Hands to Feet Forward Fold (Padangusthasana).....	44
Standing Straddle Forward Fold (Prasarita Padottanasana).....	46
Bird of Paradise.....	48
Camel (Ustrasana).....	49
Gate (Parighasana).....	51
Kneeling Half Bow.....	52
Sequencing Standing and Balancing Postures	
Creating Sequences.....	53

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Introduction

This manual will explain methods for teaching numerous standing and balancing postures. You will learn the steps to bring your students into each pose, the physical and mental benefits of each pose, modifications your students can do when needed, and specific teaching points for common student problems.

Standing poses are best practiced after warm-ups and sun salutations and before seated or lying down postures. It's important to have your students warm-up before practicing standing postures to prevent any pulled or strained muscles. Unlike warm-ups and sun salutations, standing postures are held in one position while focusing on the breath. As a teacher, you can remind your students to focus on their breath as they hold a standing posture, and remind them of the benefits of the posture.

These standing postures in this manual have been ordered as they would be taught in class, in which one pose flows into another. Keep this order in mind when you are planning your own classes. At the end of this session, you can plan your own sequences of standing postures.

You will also see the Sanskrit name in parentheses for each posture that has a Sanskrit name. Many students enjoy learning the Sanskrit names of yoga postures and Sanskrit provides a single terminology (language) for yoga teachers throughout the world, so we can better understand one another and what we are teaching.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Mountain Pose (Tadasana)



Benefits:

- Improves posture
- Increases body awareness
- Relaxes the mind and body

Steps:

- Start standing with feet a few inches apart and parallel (not turned out)
- Reach up through the top of the head to lengthen the spine
- Draw your shoulders back then relax them down
- Bring the palms of your hands in line with the seams of your pants
- Engage abdominal muscles and drop your tailbone down, so there is less sway in the low back
- Bring your chin level to the floor
- Find one point in front of you to focus on, then bring your attention to your breath
- Take 4-5 long slow breaths

Flow Variation:

- Inhale, reaching arms overhead
- Exhale, drop arms back to sides

Explorations:

- Have students slightly shift their weight onto one foot and notice the changes that occur throughout the body because of that small movement.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Teaching Points:

Help students find their best posture in Tadasana by having them do the following:

- Roll back and forth on your feet (ball to heel) until you are over the center of your feet (neither leaning forward or back) and not on the outside or inside edges
- Imagine someone is pulling the top of your head towards the ceiling – this will help students lengthen their spines and not slouch
- Lift your chest slightly
- Draw your shoulders back, then relax them down – this will help students bring their shoulders in line with the rest of their bodies, not rolled forward or squeezed back too far
- Imagine trying to drop your tailbone to the floor – this will help students bring their pelvis to a neutral position
- Have students focus on their breath in this positions for a minute – this will help them become more aware of how proper posture feels
- Because you want your students to create a balanced vertical line, look at them from the side. Draw an imaginary straight line with your eyes, beginning with the students' ears. That line should pass down through the center of the shoulder, hip, knee and ankle joints.



Note:

Many people in Western cultures habitually stand with the pelvis pushed forward. To help bring the pelvis to a neutral position, have students place their hands on their hips or low back and tilt their pelvis forward and back until they feel the pelvic bowl is straight up and down, balanced over the hips.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Crescent Stretch



Benefits:

- Increases energy
- Stretches and strengthens arms, shoulders, chest, back and abdomen
- Stretches waist and sides of body
- Improves circulations
- Limbers the spine

Steps:

- Start standing with your feet parallel and close together
- Inhale, raising your arms overhead
- Exhale, interlacing your fingers
- Inhale, reach your hands up towards ceiling, relaxing your shoulders
- Exhale, reach your hands to right, as you press your hips to left
- Still reaching to right, open your chest towards ceiling, and take 3 slow, smooth breaths
- Inhale, reach your hands back up towards ceiling, fingers still interlaced
- Exhale, reach hands to left, press hips to right
- Still reaching to the left, open your chest, take 3 slow, smooth breaths
- Bring your arms back to center.
- Release your arms to the sides and shake them out.

Flow Variation:

- Move with breath
- Inhale, reach hands towards ceiling
- Exhale, reach hands to the side
- Keep moving from one side to the center, then to the other side 6-8 times, moving with breath

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Teaching Points:

- Remind students to keep their upper shoulder back and their chest open – not dropped towards the floor. This helps them get a better stretch through their shoulders and prevents strain in the upper back.
- Remind students to keep breathing smoothly through their nose – students sometimes hold their breath as they hold this posture, which can strain the body.

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Chair (Utkatasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens muscles in the thighs and hips
- Improves ankle flexibility
- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Strengthens muscles in the upper back

Steps:

- Start standing with feet a few inches apart and parallel
- Inhale, reach arms overhead
- Exhale, sit down (like sitting in a chair)
- Keep reaching arms up, creating one line from hands to tailbone.
- Tuck tailbone slightly to reduce sway in low back
- Stay here for 3-4 long breaths
- Inhale, reach arms up as you stand up
- Exhale, hands to side or to heart

Variation: (flowing chair)

- Chair can also be practiced as a flowing exercise (as in warm-ups) by doing the following:
- Start in standing position
- Inhale, reach arms up, looking up
- Exhale, sit down
- Inhale, stand up
- Exhale, sit down
- Repeat 5-6 times
- After standing the last time, exhale and bring hands to heart

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Variation:

Chair with Twist



Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep head and chest lifted as they squat down to better engage the muscles of the legs. Also, instruct students to slightly tuck their tailbone while they are in the squatting position. This helps prevent a sway back in the lower back, so there is no strain in the low back.

When teaching chair with the twist, instruct students to keep their knees together, so that one knee is not forward or back from the other. Also, instruct students to press down with the upper hand until the hands are directly over the middle of the chest. This helps to increase the twist of the spine.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Standing Backbend/Forward Bend



Benefits

- Increases circulation to the spine
- Stretches shoulders
- Strengthens legs and back
- Stretches spine

Steps:

- Begin in mountain pose
- Bring your hands behind your back, placing your palms or fists on lower back
- Pull your elbows back, open your chest, relax your shoulders
- Inhale, reaching your chest up towards ceiling
- Exhale, pressing your hips forward
- Keep looking straight ahead (if your neck is very strong you can let it fall back)
- Take 3-4 deep breaths in this position
- Roll your shoulders forward, come back to standing
- Slowly fold forward, dropping your head, bringing your nose towards your knees
- Take 3-4 deep breaths into your back, stretching it
- Drop your hands to your sides, slowly roll up to standing

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures



Standing Backbend Modification:

For students with neck problems have them keep looking forward rather than allowing head to drop back. Students should still squeeze shoulder blades together to open through chest.

Teaching Points

Instruct students to keep their hips pressed forward and their knees straight. This helps to create more arch in the back, while preventing too much strain on the low back.

Encourage students to squeeze shoulder blades together and breathe deeply through the nose to better open through the chest.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Chest Expander



Benefits:

- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Strengthens spine
- Strengthens arms
- Relieves neck and shoulder tension

Steps:

- Begin in mountain pose
- Bring your hands behind your back, interlace fingers (hold a strap if you can't reach your hands together)
- Check your posture. Keep hips neutral.
- Inhale, roll your shoulders back, opening chest
- With fingers interlaced (or holding strap) raise hands away from tailbone
- Press your shoulders down, squeeze shoulder blades together
- Take 3-4 slow breaths in this position
- Pressing hips back, fold forward, bringing your head towards your knees
- Lift hands away from your tailbone, keeping your back straight
- Take 4-6 slow long breaths in this position
- Release your hands back down to your tailbone
- Slowly rise back up to standing

Exploration:

While in this position, try breathing in through your nose and exhaling completely through your mouth. This can help the shoulders and neck relax more, so you can go more deeply into the stretch.

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Modification:

For students who can't interlace their fingers behind their back, have them hold a strap behind their back and bring their hands as close together as they can.

Students can also place their hands on their hips and bring their elbows back as much as possible to help stretch the front of their chest.

Teaching Points:

Remind students to press back through their hips as they fold forward, so they are folding from the hips rather than rounding down from their back. Students can keep their knees slightly bent, if needed.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Down Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches palms, chest, back, hamstrings, calves and feet
- Relieves low back discomfort
- Improves digestion
- Strengthens arms, wrists legs and torso
- Energizes the body
- Improves focus and stimulates the mind

Steps:

- Come to all fours, placing hands directly under shoulders, knees and feet hip width apart. Walk your hands forward about six inches.
- Spread your fingers wide
- Inhale, curl your toes under and draw your shoulder blades back
- Exhale, lift your hips and press back through your heels, drop your head
- Press your tailbone high and open your chest, pressing your chest towards your feet
- Keep your arms straight, press down through your whole hand (including thumb and index finger)
- Look towards your feet, shake your head from side to side then nod forward and back to loosen your neck and shoulders
- Pedal your heels down to the floor one at a time to get more stretch in your calves
- Breathe deeply into your back
- Stay here for 5-10 breaths
- Walk your feet forward between your hands, coming into forward fold
- Slowly roll up, coming to standing

Exploration:

One way to explore down dog is to practice with the heels turned out. In western culture, many people have tight calves because they do not regularly squat. These powerful muscles of propulsion and balance are also tightened by running and jogging. In down dog, turn the heels out and firmly press them down. Notice how much more stretch you feel in the calves.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modification:



Some students may have problems with their wrists and find it difficult to place weight on the wrists. Have these students try the modification (above) using their forearms instead of their hands (dolphin).

Teaching Points:

Down dog is considered one of the most fundamental of all yoga postures. It is often used between other postures as a transitional posture to keep the flow of the practice going. It is important to check that your students are doing the following:

Hands remain shoulder width apart, not too close or too far away

The distance between the hands and feet is about the same as the distance from the student's heels to their tailbone (the triangle formed is not too narrow or too wide)

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Warrior 1 (Virabhadrasana 1)



Benefits:

- Strengthens the arches, ankles, knees and thighs
- Stretches the hips and shoulders
- Strengthens the arms
- Broadens the chest
- Increases muscular endurance

Steps:

- Start standing towards the back of your mat with your hands at your sides and feet hip width apart and parallel
- Place your hands on your hips and step your right foot forward one full, but comfortable stride (about 3 or 3 ½ feet)
- Turn your back foot out slightly, so your heel and outside edge of your back foot press against the floor
- Use your hands to square your hips forward (so hips are not turned to the side)
- Exhale, dropping your hands to your sides
- Inhaling, sweep your arms overhead with your palms facing each other about shoulder width apart
- Exhale, bend your right knee until it is directly over your right ankle
- Draw your shoulders slightly back and down to open your chest
- Tuck your tailbone slightly
- Look forward or slightly up
- Take 4-5 breaths in this position
- Continue with Warrior 2 before repeating this exercise on the other side

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Exploration:

One of the greatest challenges of Warrior 1 is squaring the hips to the front. Focusing on the following points can help: 1) Make sure the back foot isn't turned out too much. As you turn your foot in, it becomes easier to turn your hips and torso forward. 2) Focus on the hips. When the right leg is in front, focus on bringing the left hip forward. 3) The arm on the side of the body of the back leg is often under stretched. To counteract this, bring the shoulder into the turn as well as the hips.

Teaching Points:

Check that students keep their front knee directly over the ankle. This will help protect the knee and ankle joints. Also, Warrior 1 includes a slight back bending movement, so it is fine to notice an arch in students' lower backs. Encourage students to keep the back leg straight and keep the weight evenly distributed between the front and back legs, so they are neither leaning forward or backwards, but the torso is upright and the chest open.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Humble Warrior



Benefits:

- Stretches the hips and legs
- Strengthens the legs
- Stretches legs and ankles
- Enhances shoulder flexibility

Steps:

- From Warrior 1, bring hands down to sides and straighten front knee
- Bring hands behind the back, interlacing the fingers
- Bend front knee over the ankle
- Inhale, reach hands away from tailbone and bring front knee slightly out to the side (photo 1 above)
- Exhale, reach forward with head and chest, dropping the belly to the inside of the front thigh, then bringing the nose towards the front foot (photo 2)
- Stay in this position for 3-4 deep breaths
- Bring hands back to tailbone and come back up to standing lunge or drop down into a full lunge

Modification:

Some students may find it difficult to keep hands behind their back as they drop down. Encourage them to keep their hands on their hips instead and drawing their elbows back as they reach their chest forward and drop their torso down.

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to keep their front knee bent and in line with their ankle (not too far forward or back) as they drop their torso down. Students should however drop their knee slightly to the side to make room for their head and torso to pass by. Remind students to keep the heel of their back foot pressed against the floor. This will help them maintain balance, while also stretching the back leg.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Full Lunge (Alanasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the hips, legs and tops of feet
- Improves balance
- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Strengthens legs

Steps:

- From Warrior 1 or Humble Warrior, drop back knee to floor, while placing hands on either side of front foot
- Moving into the full position can place strain on the hip flexors, so if you feel any strain, stay in the lunge position with hands down
- When ready, first place hands on hips
- Inhale, reach arms overhead, bringing palms together
- Breathe deeply through the nose
- Stay in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Drop hands back to floor on either sides of front foot
- Step back foot forward and fold forward
- Repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to press down and forward with the front foot. This helps students maintain their balance and keeps the leg muscles more active. Remind students to listen to their bodies and only go to their “edge” – that point where they feel challenged, but their body is not strained. The full lunge pose can place quite a bit of strain on the hip flexor muscles, so encourage students to keep their hands on the floor if they feel any strain.

For students who keep their hands down, encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply into their belly. This will help their hips relax and more easily stretch.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Warrior 2 (Virabhadrasana 2)



Benefits:

- Strengthens the arches, ankles, knees and thighs
- Strengthens the arms
- Stretches the hips and shoulders
- Enhances muscular endurance
- Lengthens the spine

Steps:

- Start in Warrior 1 (see previous pages) with your right foot forward
- Inhale, reaching up through your arms and straightening both legs
- Exhale, turn your body towards the left (open to the side), bring your arms down to shoulder height and bend your right knee, so that it is directly over your ankle
- Check that your shoulders are over your hips, so you are not leaning forward or backward (this will even out the weight distribution over your legs)
- Keeping your hips facing the side, turn your head to look over your right finger tips
- Breathe deeply, allowing your ribs to expand fully with each breath
- Take 4-5 breaths in this position
- On your next inhale, straighten both legs, bring your hands down to your sides and step to the front of your mat
- Repeat Warrior 1 and 2 on the other side

Exploration:

Bring your focus to your back arm, stretching back through the back hand as much as you reach forward with the front hand. Notice the stretch through the arms and shoulders and how you can become more active in this position. Imagine you are trying to pull the mat apart with your feet, pressing your feet down and apart on the mat. This way you aren't simply hanging out over your joints, but actively engaging the muscles in your legs.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep front knee bent over the ankle and to draw their knee slightly back, so they can just see their big toe. This helps open the hips more while strengthening the leg. Also, remind students to keep the chest open to the side, only turning the neck to look over the front hand. This helps to keep the hips and chest more open.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Reverse Warrior



Benefits:

- Strengthens muscles in the thigh and buttocks
- Stretches the front of the body
- Improves flexibility of the shoulders
- Energizes the body

Steps:

- From Warrior 1 (with right foot forward), drop left hand down the back of left leg
- Keep right knee bent over right ankle and stretch right hand straight up
- Look up towards right hand
- Take 4-5 deep breaths through your nose in this position
- Repeat on the other side – Warrior 1 then Reverse Warrior

Variation

Instead of reaching right hand straight up, bring right arm next to ear and reach behind you. Look towards your back foot. This increases the stretch in the low back.

Exploration:

Try both variations of reverse warrior and notice the change in how and where you feel the stretch.

Teaching Points:

Many students have a tendency to either lean forward or backwards in this position. Remind them to keep their torso upright and to keep their weight evenly distributed between both legs. Student also often straighten their front leg when going into this pose. Remind students to keep their front knee bent directly over the ankle.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variation of Reverse Warrior – Arm Behind Back



Instead of sliding one hand down the back leg, you can also wrap your arm behind your back, creating a deeper stretch in the side body.

Original Form of Reverse Warrior



Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Extended Angle (Utthita Parsvakonasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens ankles and muscles in the thighs
- Opens the hips
- Improves digestion
- Stretches muscles in the back and sides of the body

Steps:

- If starting from Warrior 2 (with right knee bent), simply drop right elbow to right thigh and sweep left arm around, bringing your upper arm next to your ear.
- You can also start from standing position by first stepping feet out about 3-4 feet, turn right foot to front of mat and turn left foot in about 10 degrees. Bend right knee over right foot, drop right elbow to right thigh and sweep left arm next to ear.
- Try to establish one straight diagonal line from hand to foot
- Keep bringing left shoulder back, opening chest to the side
- Actively reach with your left hand as you breathe deeply through your nose
- Stay here for 4-5 long breaths
- Repeat on other side

Exploration:

Actively extend and stretch your top arm, while you press back through the heel of your extended leg. Notice the stretch along your side and breathe into the stretch.

Teaching Points:

Often students will drop their chest towards the floor and press the tailbone back (so that the buttocks sticks out). Instruct students to stack one hip on top of the other (as in Triangle) and tuck their tailbone in, while keeping their chest open to the side. Have your students imagine they are between two panes of glass, making their body narrow. Students may not be able to drop down as far into the extended angle, but it will help bring a better stretch to the side of their body and their low back.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Students also often keep their hip raised. Remind them to drop their hips to create one straight line from their hand to the heel of their back foot. This will help to open the hips more.

Finally, encourage students to keep their arm next to their ear and draw their shoulder back. This will help them to keep their chest open to the side, rather than letting the chest drop.

Variations:

Variation 1 (Drop Hand)



Variation 2 (Bind)



Variation 1:

- From extended angle, drop right hand in front of right foot, drop hips to maintain straight line from hand to foot (this provides a deeper stretch for hips and legs)

Variation 2: (Option to Bind)

Extended Angle can also be practiced with a bind.

Steps:

- From extended angle, drop right hand in front of right leg (leg with bent knee)
- Wrap right arm under right leg and bring left hand behind back
- Clasp hands together behind back
- Open chest to the side and look towards the ceiling
- Take 4-5 long slow breaths in this position
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points

Many students want to try the bind, but have difficulty clasping their hands together. Give your students a strap to hold between hands, so they can still have the leverage of the bind without needing to bring hands completely together. Also, remind students to notice their breath. If their breath becomes choppy or they find they are gasping for air, encourage them to go back to regular extended angle and slowly work their way to the bind. In yoga, you want your students to challenge themselves, but not to the point of overload or exhaustion.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Triangle (Trikonasana)



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Stretches hamstring muscles
- Stretches the back
- Increases flexibility of the hip joints
- Strengthen muscles in the front of thigh

Steps:

- Step feet apart about 4 feet. The width should be determined by the length of the student's legs – the legs are about as wide as the length from the student's foot to waist.
- Turn your left foot in, so the left toes point about halfway towards the right foot.
- Turn the right foot towards the front of the mat (away from you)
- Bring arms out to your sides at shoulder height.
- Shift your left hip up.
- Exhale, reach your right hand towards the right, then let it drop down your right leg as your left arm reaches towards the ceiling.
- Only bring your right hand down to a point where you can still keep your chest open to the side (not dropped towards the floor), with your shoulders stacked one on top of the other and your hips stacked vertically over one another. Right hand can be placed on your right thigh, shin or ankle or on the floor behind your right foot (depending on flexibility).
- Press against your right leg with your right hand to open the chest more to the side, if needed.
- Take 4-5 slow, deep breaths through your nose in this position, breathing into your back.
- Inhale, press down through your toes and come back to standing.
- Turn feet in other direction and repeat on the other side.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Exploration:

Once your students are in Triangle Pose, encourage students to stretch out through both arms and both legs, pressing down through the legs, while reaching up through the top arm. You want your students to expand their limbs in all directions from their center – like a starfish.

Modifications:

If a student has a difficult time stepping their feet wide, while maintaining balance, have them keep their feet just a couple feet apart and gradually work on bringing the feet farther apart.

Variation:

Extended Triangle with arm next to ear

From Triangle, bring top arm next to ear (or towards ear). Only go so far as you can keep chest and belly open to the side. Notice if belly or chest begins to turn towards floor and come back to a point where chest and belly can stay open to side.

Teaching Points:

Many students drop their top shoulder and chest towards the floor, while pressing their tailbone out. This reduces the stretch in the low back and can strain the top shoulder joint and upper back. If you notice students dropping their chests towards the floor, have everyone come to the wall with their backs next to the wall and feet in triangle position and arms against the wall at shoulder height. Tell your students to slowly drop their right hand down their right leg, while keeping their left shoulder blade and left sitting bone on the wall. They may not be able to bring their right hand down their right leg very far, but they will feel the stretch in their low back and gain a better understanding of how to properly do the posture to get all of its benefits.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Half Moon (Ardha Chandrasana)



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Stretches hamstring muscles
- Increases flexibility of hip joints
- Strengthens front thigh muscles
- Stretches the back

Steps:

- From triangle on the right side (right hand down), drop left hand to the floor.
- Place right hand on the floor diagonally away from right foot (in front and to the outside)
- Place weight onto right leg and bend right knee slightly
- Bring left hand to left hip
- Kick left foot off the floor, bringing left leg parallel to the floor, and straighten right leg
- Open chest to the side (try not to let chest face the floor)
- Draw left shoulder back, so left shoulder is directly over the right shoulder
- Reach left hand up, so there is one straight line from left hand/arm to right hand

Modification:

For students who have difficulty balancing in half moon, have them practice the position with their backs against a wall. This will help them open their chest without worrying about falling backwards.

Students can also place a block on the floor, so they don't have to reach all the way down to the floor with their hand.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Teaching Points:

- Remind students to flex the foot of the lifted leg – this helps keep the leg muscles active and engaged. Also encourage students to begin turning their toes up towards the ceiling. This will help open the hips.
- Foot of standing leg should remain facing the front of the mat (not turned in or out) – students have a tendency to turn the foot in to help with balance, but this actually creates less stability. This is because an inward rotation of the thighbone causes less surface area to touch in the hip joint (pelvis and thigh bone). The less surface area that touches, the less stable the pose.
- Instruct students to turn their raised foot towards the ceiling. This externally rotates the hip of the lifted leg and creates a more stable pose as those muscles are contracted.
- For students who have a difficult time reaching the floor with their hand, have them place their hand on a block or a chair they place just in front and slightly to the outside of their front foot.
- For students who have difficulty with their balance have them practice the posture with their back next to a wall.
- Remind your students to stay focused during the transition of going into and out of the pose. Help them focus on the process, not just the end point.

Variation: Half Moon with Hands at Heart



From Half Moon, release the bottom hand from the floor and slowly bring the hands together at the heart.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variation: Half Moon with Foot Hold



From Half Moon, bend the knee of the top leg and reach hand back to hold onto the ankle. Keep the chest and torso facing to the side (do not drop chest to face the floor or standing leg). Kick foot back slightly to stretch the shoulder and chest.

Teaching Points:

Remind students to go into this variation slowly and with awareness, backing off if they feel they are about to lose their balance.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Pyramid (Parsvottanasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the calves and hamstrings
- Stretches the shoulders and chest
- Improves balance
- Releases the hips
- Improves digestion and circulation

Steps:

- From standing, step left foot back about 2 ½ to 3 feet.
- Turn back foot out until the heel of your back foot can press down to the floor
- Check that the front heel and back heel are lined up
- Hold opposite elbows behind back – note: for students with more flexibility, they can bring hands to prayer position between their shoulder blades on their back
- Inhale, look up and arch back
- Exhale, fold forward, folding from the hips and pressing back through the tailbone to keep the back flat (not rounded)
- As you fold forward, keep reaching head forward, bringing your chin towards your shin.
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long breaths.
- On next inhale, use the strength of the legs to come back up
- Step back foot forward, back to standing
- Repeat on the other side.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modification:



To modify the arm position, have students place hands on hips and draw elbows back, rather than holding onto opposite elbows behind the back. This requires less shoulder flexibility, while also gently improving current levels of flexibility.

Teaching Points:

Many students tend to shift their hips as they come down, so that the hip of the forward foot is pressed forward, while the hip of the back leg is shifted back. To bring hips back to a balanced position, remind students to draw the right hip back (when the right foot is forward). Making this adjustment will cause greater stretch in the hamstring muscles, but will also improve students' balance in this position.

Many students also will begin rounding their backs as the fold forward, attempting to get their heads closer to their front leg. Encourage students to bend their front knee if they need to and press back through the hips, in order to decrease the stretch in the hamstrings. Once they fold forward, they can relax the back and allow the flexion of the spine.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Revolved Triangle (Parivrtta Trikonasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches legs and hips
- Stretches the spine and torso
- Strengthens legs and ankles

Steps:

- Start standing with right foot in front facing forward, back foot turned out
- Right heel should be directly in front of left heel
- Place right hand on right hip, reach left straight up overhead
- Exhale, fold forward (hinging from hips) until torso is parallel to floor
- Place left hand on right foot and extend through your spine
- Turn towards the right, then reach right hand straight up
- Stay in this position for 3-4 long breaths
- Drop right hand back to the floor
- Inhale, come back to standing (original position), Repeat on other side

Alternate Steps:

- From Triangle, drop extended arm to floor, next to front foot
- Exhale, sweep opposite arm up
- Reach forward through head and press back through hips, lengthening through the spine
- Bring belly in close to thigh
- Stay in this position for 3-4 long breaths
- Drop hand to floor and raise original hand, coming back to Triangle position

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to reach forward with their head as they press back through their hips. This will help them to lengthen their spine and keep their hips centered between their legs. Encourage students to bend their knees, if necessary, rather than round their back. Rounding the back can place strain on it.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Tree (Vrksasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens muscles of standing leg and foot
- Lengthens the spine
- Improves balance
- Opens shoulders, chest and hips
- Improves concentration and focus

Steps:

- Stand with your feet about hip width apart and parallel (not turned out)
- Put your weight on your left foot
- Find a point to focus on at eye level in front of you (this is called your “drishti” point)
- Bring your right foot to the inside of your left calf or thigh
- Draw your right knee back to open through your hips
- Reach up through the top of your head to lengthen through your spine
- Bring your hands to your heart or bring your hands out to the sides (like tree branches) with your palms up. Bringing the hands out to the sides helps with balance and turning the palms up helps to open the chest. Or raise arms up.
- Focus on your breath, taking 4-5 long slow breaths through the nose.
- Bring hands back to sides and drop foot to floor.
- Repeat on other side.

Exploration:

- Remind students to focus on their “drishti” point (spot on the wall), on their breath or on the sensations of the movement – noticing the little dance of their standing foot as they maintain their balance.
- Another way to explore balance is to close the eyes and notice how removing visual cues affects balance.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variations:

- From tree pose, keep foot against opposite leg and reach arms overhead, bringing palms together.
- Keep arms next to ears, shoulders back and relaxed.
- Take 3-4 slow breaths through the nose in this position.
- Repeat on other side

Modification:

For students who have trouble with balance, have them:

- 1) Stand with their back against a wall, or
- 2) Bring the sole of their foot only to their ankle (not to calf or thigh)

Teaching Points:

Students may think that tree pose is about balance only and overlook the need for symmetry in the pose. Remind students to press down through the standing leg and level hips, so they are parallel to the floor – not tilted towards one side. Pressing down through the standing foot, while reaching up through the head, also helps improve stability in the pose.

Flow Variation: Toppling Tree

Another variation to Tree Pose is Toppling Tree, which requires more leg strength and flexibility than regular tree pose.



Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Improves balance
- Strengthens legs
- Improves flexibility of legs and hips

Steps:

- Start in Tree Pose with right foot placed on left thigh
- Bring right knee back to open through hips and bring hands together in front of chest
- Focus on your natural breath and find your balance, staying in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Exhale, fold forward, pressing back through the hips and bending the standing leg, if necessary
- Drop your head, so you are looking towards the knee of your standing leg
- Stay in this position for 2-3 breaths
- Inhale, bend the standing leg, coming all the way down into a one-foot squat (other foot is crossed on the opposite thigh) with hands on the floor for support
- Bring hands together in front of chest, doing your best to balance on one foot (place hands on floor as necessary). Stay in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Place hands back on floor
- Exhale, straighten standing leg and fold forward (other foot is still placed on opposite thigh)
- Stay here for 2-3 breaths
- Bend knee of standing leg slightly
- Inhale, use strength of the standing leg to come back to Tree Pose (with right foot still placed on left thigh)
- Stay in tree pose for 3-4 breaths
- Exhale, drop hands and feet back to sides
- Repeat on the other side

Modification:

If students find this toppling tree series difficult, they can try modifying it by placing their right foot across their opposite shin (instead of thigh). This way, as they come down into the squat, the right calf will drop to the floor, giving them more support for balancing and requiring less flexibility. It is also easier to come back to standing with the right foot in this modified position, while still doing an exercise that will help build leg strength.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Eagle (Garundasana)



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Enhances concentration
- Stretches shoulders and the muscles around shoulder blades
- Strengthens the legs

Steps:

- Start standing with feet about hip width apart and parallel
- Inhale, reach your arms overhead
- Exhale, drop your arms to shoulder height and cross your right arm under your left arm.
- Bend your elbows, bringing your hands towards your face and wrap your forearms around each other, bringing your palms together.
- On your next exhale, squat down, keeping your upper body in a vertical position (not leaning forward)
- Cross your right thigh over your left thigh and wrap your right foot around your left calf.
- Tuck your tailbone to keep your low back from swaying too much.
- Focus on one point in front of you and focus on your breath.
- Stay in this position for 3-4 slow breaths
- Release your arms, raising arms overhead
- Counter with a forward fold

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modifications:

Students often have difficulty wrapping their legs around each other. Encourage students to simply squat or only cross their leg over, placing their foot on the floor next to their opposite leg. Encourage students to only go to the point where they feel challenged, but are able to maintain their balance and maintain a slow and even breath.

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to tuck their tailbone once they are in this position. This helps keep the pelvis in a neutral position. Also, check that students keep their knees bent. There is a tendency for students to straighten their legs once they come into this position. Keeping the knees bent will help to work the muscles in the legs.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Dancer (Natarajasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens the leg muscles and arches of the feet
- Opens chest and shoulders
- Stretches the hips and quadriceps
- Tones the spine
- Improves balance

Steps:

- Start standing with your hands at your sides and feet hip width apart and parallel
- Inhaling, sweep your arms overhead
- Exhaling, drop your right arm to your side (left arm still raised)
- Find a point to focus on
- On your next inhale, bring your right heel towards your tailbone and hold onto your right foot (or ankle) with your right hand
- If you can balance here, begin to press your right foot away from your tailbone, still holding your foot in your right hand (left arm still overhead)
- Kick your foot back and up, straightening your back knee as much as you can
- Take 5-6 slow long breaths in this position, focusing on one point in front of you to help still your mind and body
- On your next exhale, release your foot and bring both arms back down to your sides
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modification:

Students can also practice this pose standing next to a wall (extended arm and standing leg next to the wall). This can help students become more comfortable with balance poses. Students with knee problems can skip the ankle hold and simply lift their foot towards their lower hand, while stretching up through their raised arm.

Teaching Points:

Students are often anxious to begin kicking their raised foot back. When students first bring their raised foot to their hand, have them first bring their knees together. This will bring their body into proper alignment and give them time to find their balance before kicking back. Many students begin tipping forward too much as they kick their raised foot up and back. This, however, reduces the back arch that this pose is meant to create. Encourage students to keep reaching their top hand up, as well as forward as they kick their back foot up and back. Also, instruct students to draw their shoulder back (shoulder on the same side as hand holding foot). This will help keep the chest and torso open and more upright. Remind students to keep their hips facing forward. This will increase the stretch in their standing leg, while also helping them maintain their balance.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Standing Hand To Foot (Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana)



Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Stretches hamstring muscles
- Improves balance

Steps:

- Start standing with feet about hip width apart and parallel
- Place weight onto left leg
- Find a point to focus on that is directly in front of you (drishti point)
- Inhale, bring right knee to your chest and place right hand under the sole of the right foot (or wrap first two fingers around your big toe)
- Exhale, extend right leg forward, while still holding the sole of the foot
- Inhale, bring left arm out to side – slightly higher than shoulder height with palm turned up
- Exhale, open right leg out to the right side
- Bring awareness to breath – breathing slow and deep
- Reach up through top of head to lengthen through spine
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long breaths
- Bring right leg back to center then bend knee and place right foot back on the floor
- Repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Students often want to extend their leg to the detriment of their alignment. Remind students that a bent knee is better than a rounded back. If students have a difficult time keeping their back straight when placing their hand under their foot, encourage them to try the modification instead (see below).

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modification: Hand to Knee



The benefits are similar to Hand to Foot with the exception of stretching the hamstring muscles. This gentler form of the pose helps students work with their balance as well as develop more hip flexibility and hip strength.

Steps:

- Start standing with feet about hip width apart and parallel
- Place weight onto left leg
- Find a point to focus on that is directly in front of you (drishti point)
- Bring your awareness to your breath
- Inhale, bring right knee towards your chest and place right hand on right knee. Bring left hand out to the side
- Exhale, open right leg out to the right side
- Bring awareness to breath – breathing slow and deep
- Reach up through top of head to lengthen through spine
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long breaths
- Bring right leg back to center then bend knee and place right foot back on the floor
- Repeat on other side

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Warrior 3 (Virabhadrasana 3)



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Strengthens the legs and arms
- Improves posture and back strength
- Improves flexibility of hips and legs

Steps:

- Start standing
- Bring left foot back (keeping weight on right foot) and raise arms to shoulder height (photo 1)
- Exhale, reach arms forward as you reach up and back with left foot (coming towards a T position)
- Focus on one point slightly in front of you
- Stay here for 4-5 natural breaths, breathing through the nose
- Slowly raise head and chest and drop arms and back leg, coming back to standing

Teaching Points:

Often students want to get into the T position so much that they lose their balance or begin rounding their back. Encourage students to move slowly, focusing on the feeling of the pose. Have them focus on the feeling of reaching forward with the hands and reaching back through the back foot, lengthening through the spine, and stopping at the point where they notice they are beginning to wobble or beginning to round their back.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variation:

From Warrior 3, students can go into a one-leg forward fold variation of the pose. This creates an inversion that works on balance and developing more flexibility in the hips and legs.

One Leg Forward Fold



Benefits:

- Improves balance
- Relieves tension in neck and upper back
- Increases flexibility in hips and legs
- Strengthens muscles in the legs

Steps:

- First, come into Warrior 3, staying in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Exhale, drop hands to the floor as you fold forward
- Keep raising back leg up as you bring your nose towards the shin of your standing leg
- You can stay in this position, or try holding onto your ankle with one or both hands
- Stay in this position for 3-4 deep breaths, breathing through the nose
- Place hands back on the floor and drop raised foot to the floor, coming into a relaxed forward fold
- Inhale, slowly come back to standing
- Repeat Warrior 3, one leg forward fold series on the other side

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Hands to Feet Forward Fold (Padangusthasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches hamstrings and hips
- Strengthens arms and shoulders
- Relieves tension in head and neck

Steps:

- From one leg forward fold, drop raised leg, placing feet about 2 inches apart on the floor and parallel (not turned out)
- If coming from standing position, fold forward, checking that feet are about 2 inches apart and parallel (not turned out)
- Wrap first two fingers of each hand around each big toe with elbows pointing out
- Inhale, look up, lengthening through the spine
- Exhale, use the strength of the arms to pull the upper body down, bringing the nose towards the knees.
- Stay in this position for 4-5 long breaths, breathing through the nose
- Release hands, coming back to an easy forward fold
- Come back to standing or place hands on floor and step back to down dog

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variation:

Hands to Feet Forward Fold with Leg Lift to Side



Steps:

- While still holding the big toes with first two fingers of each hand, begin placing weight onto left leg
- Raise head and chest slightly, lengthening through the spine
- Bend left knee slightly as you put your weight on your left leg
- Inhale, lift right leg to the side, while still holding the right big toe with the right hand fingers
- Stay in this position for 3-4 slow breaths
- Drop right foot back to floor
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Standing Straddle Forward Fold (Prasarita Padottanasana)



Benefits:

- Strengthens the feet, ankles, knees, inner thighs and lower back
- Improves digestion and circulation
- Relieves back tension
- Improves flexibility of hips and hamstring muscles

Steps:

- Stand with your legs about 3 ½ to 4 feet apart with feet parallel (not turned out)
- Place your hands on your hips, drawing elbows back to open through chest
- Inhale, look up and arch back
- Exhale, fold forward, folding from the hips, pressing tailbone back to keep back flat (not rounded)
- Place hands on the floor about shoulder width apart
- Walk hands back until they are in line with feet
- Bend elbows, so they point behind you and drop the top of your head towards the floor
- As you inhale, reach up through tailbone, then as you exhale, drop head and shoulders more towards the floor
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths – breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Exploration:

Try pressing down more through your heels as you lift your sitting bones up towards the ceiling. Imagine you are trying to turn your pelvic bowl all the way upside down. Notice the length that creates in the back of the legs and along the spine.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Variation



Modification



Variation:

From the posture, bring hands to ankles and wrap hands around the outside of ankles. Pull against legs with hands to come more deeply into the pose.

Modification:

If students have difficulty dropping head down, they can keep hands on floor in front of feet and bend knees if necessary.

Teaching Points:

In most yoga postures, we emphasize nose breathing (breathing in and out through the nose) to help keep breath smooth and slow down breathing rate. In Prasarita Padottanasana encourage students to try inhaling through the nose, but exhaling through the mouth. This can help relax the neck and shoulders while in this position.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Bird of Paradise



Benefits

- Strengthen legs and core
- Stretches shoulders
- Stretches hips and hamstrings

Steps:

- Start standing with your feet a little wider than hip width apart
- Fold forward and place your right arm between your legs
- Wrap your right arm around the inside of your right leg
- Wrap your left arm behind your back and clasp your hands together
- Put your weight onto your left foot
- Slowly begin standing up, with your arms still wrapped around your right thigh
- Once you are standing straight up, begin lifting your foot towards the ceiling
- Stay in this position for 4-6 breaths
- Slowly lower your right foot to the floor
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Camel (Ustrasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the thighs, torso, chest, shoulders and throat
- Strengthens the legs, pelvis and lower back
- Aids digestion
- Stimulates circulation
- Improves posture

Steps:

- Start in a kneeling position with knees about hip width apart and your hands on your hips, elbows back
- Point feet straight back with top of the feet on the floor
- Inhale, stretch up through the top of your head
- Exhale, press hips forward as you arch back and head falls back
- If possible, students can place hands one at a time on each heel, but only if they can keep their hips pressed forward (hips directly over knees)
- Allow the chest and throat to fully open
- Take 4-5 deep breaths through the nose in this position.
- Slowly come back up, bringing one hand up at a time
- Sit back on heels and rest in child's pose (chest dropped to thighs) for 3-4 breaths
- Come back to kneeling and repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Many students will have a difficult time reaching their hands to their feet. Encourage them to do the modification for camel (see below) by keeping their hands on their low back. It's important that students keep their hips directly over their knees, regardless of the form of the pose they choose. Otherwise, a person is merely leaning back rather than lifting up and arching the back.

It's important to have students practice a counter pose, such as child's pose, immediately after camel. The intense backbend of camel causes muscles to contract along the spine. Child's pose gives these muscles a chance to relax and prevents muscles spasms or strain.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Modification:

Many students may have a difficult time reaching their hands to their heels while keeping their hips pressed forward. Have them do the Half Camel modification instead.

Half Camel



Steps:

- Start in a kneeling position with knees about hip width apart
- Place fists or palms on low back and draw back the elbows and shoulders, squeezing the shoulder blades
- Point feet straight back with tops of the feet on the floor
- Inhale, stretch up through the top of your head
- Exhale, press hips forward as you arch back and head falls back
- Allow the chest and throat to fully open
- Take 4-5 deep breaths through the nose in this position.
- Slowly come back up
- Sit back on heels and rest in child's pose (chest dropped to thighs) for 3-4 breaths
- Come back to kneeling and repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

If a student has neck problems, instruct them to keep looking forward, instead of dropping their head back, while they keep pressing their hips forward and squeezing their shoulder blades together.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Gate (Parighasasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches muscles along the sides of the body
- Opens the chest
- Tone abdominal organs
- Strengthens the ankle and hip joint
- Stretches the inner thigh and calves

Steps:

- Kneel on the floor with knees about hips width apart and hands on hips
- Stretch right leg out to the side, keeping foot in line with left knee and turning right foot forward (facing same direction as head and torso)
- Inhale, reach arms overhead
- Exhale, drop your right hand down your right leg
- Keep reaching your left hand straight up towards ceiling, or reach left hand towards the right hand
- Keep chest open (not dropped towards the floor)
- Stay in this position for 4-5 deep breaths through the nose
- Inhale, reach arms overhead
- Exhale, bring arms back to sides and come back to kneeling position
- Repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Students often drop their chest, turning their torso towards the extended leg. Remind them to keep their chest open and forward and for them to imagine bringing their side towards the extended leg. Also, instruct students to draw back the shoulder of the raised arm. This helps keep the chest open and stretch the shoulder.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Kneeling Half Bow



Benefits:

- Improves balance and coordination
- Stretches the spinal column
- Strengthens the muscles that support the spine
- Strengthens the back of the thigh

Steps:

- Start on all fours with your wrists directly under your shoulders and your knees at a right angle
- On an inhale, extend your right arm and left leg up, so they are both parallel to the floor.
- Stay in this position for a breath.
- Bend your back knee (left leg) and reach your right arm back to hold onto your left foot or ankle.
- Inhaing, reach your hand and foot up towards the ceiling.
- Stay in this position for 4-6 breaths, continue to reach your hand and foot up towards the ceiling as you draw your right shoulder blade back and open through your chest.
- Slowly come back to all fours and repeat on the other side (left arm, right leg).
- Counter this posture with child's pose.

Teaching and Practicing Standing and Balancing Postures

Creating Sequences

To maintain the rhythm of your yoga practice, it's important to order your standing postures in a sequence that flows together. This means that once you complete one posture, you can easily flow into the next posture. This flow is especially helpful for the warrior sequences that are usually done before any standing balancing postures. For many postures, it's helpful to create a sequence of 3 to 4 postures that flow together, then rest in down dog before doing that same sequence of 3 to 4 postures on the other side (i.e. right or left side). For certain postures (i.e. Tree, Dancer) which require more balance, sequencing directly from one posture to another is not as important.

Below is an example of a standing sequence:

- Starting from Down Dog.
- Prepare for Warrior 1 (from down dog, step right foot forward to a lunge)
- Warrior 1 (lift arms and chest, coming into Warrior 1)
- Warrior 2 (turn chest to side to move into Warrior 2)
- Reverse Warrior (slide left hand down back leg, reach right arm up)
- Triangle (come back up, straightening both legs, then slide right hand down right leg)
- Bring both hands to floor (drop hands to floor on either side of front leg)
- Step back to Down Dog
- Repeat on the left side

Use the space below to create two of your own sequences for a series of standing postures.

Sequence 1:

Sequence 2: