

POSE OF THE MONTH

April 2005

The Sun Salute – Surya Namaskara

Surya means sun, and *namaskara* is a greeting, so we are greeting the sun :)

The sun is the soul of the world. Rig Veda 1.115.1

A few weeks ago, I was talking about how moving our body in rhythm with our breath is about cortical balance in the brain between the relaxing and excitatory phases. Society today tends us toward the excitatory side of the brain, we need to learn how to relax the brain more. When the brain is too long in the excitatory phase is when anxiety, depression, mood swings, and other issues arise, which do seem more prevalent today.

That is the difference between exercise and yoga — **yoga includes a contemplative awareness within the practice of postures, which includes moving our body in a rhythm with our breath.** Especially beneficial for balancing the function of the brain is moving our extremities in rhythm with our breath. This enhances our [GABA and oxytocin](#) making us nicer people.

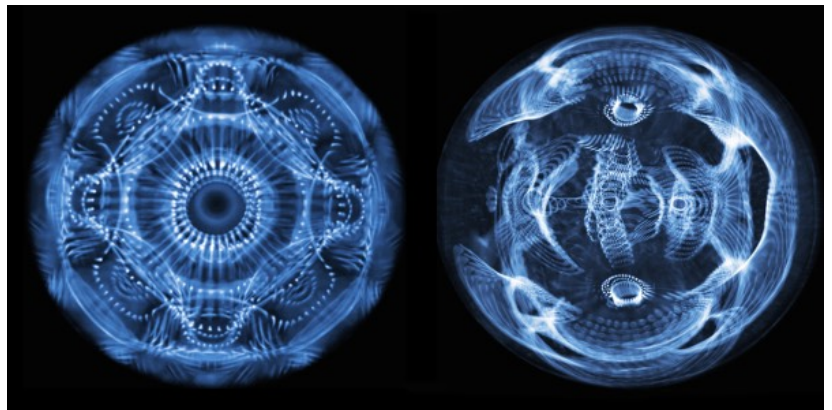
This is one of the reasons sun salutes are such an important part of the practice.

Sun salutes aka moving your extremities in rhythm with your breath synchronize our brain, also we bring our heart rhythm into coherence with our breath — sun salutes synchronize this too. Literally sun salutes help encourage our entire body's synchronicity - to work in a time and rhythm together to keep all systems running smoothly. Sun salutes can do all this!

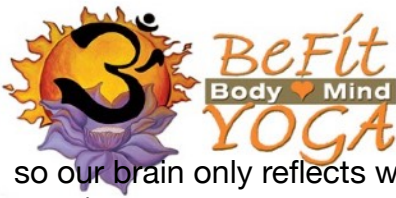
I referenced the yoga textbook “Hatha Yoga Pradipika” to research the sun salutes. They tout the benefits of the sun salute, which come from a balanced cortical response, though they do not directly say that — they are saying the benefits that manifest from a balanced cortical response.

These texts also talk about the symbolism of the sun and why this practice perhaps was named a sun salute — to help bring awareness to honoring the sun.

Worship of the sun was created because the sun is a powerful symbol of spiritual consciousness and health of body & mind. In the body our heart is our sun — or inner sun (our brain is the moon,



Synchronicity of our body's functions reminds me of some of the work of researchers who looking at cells under microscopes and recording their sound vibrations got the images above. The picture on the left is a healthy cell, the picture on the right is a cancerous cell.



so our brain only reflects what is in our heart). Sun Salutes worship the outer and inner sun (our heart).

The Sun Salutes are the foundation stone of yoga. They are where we connect our moving and breathing rhythm and focus for our entire practice.

The yogic texts don't talk put your energy into getting a bind or a jump through or some cool arm balance ... The yogic texts say to put your effort into moving in rhythm with your breath (vinyasa), bandhas, and drishti and all else will follow. The sun salutes help us do this.

This internal contemplative practice within our yoga is what gives yoga a it's benefit over just exercise alone.

Sun salutes help gather the strength of the mind in one direction and aid in mental focus. Without its focusing of mental energies, yoga practice amounts to little more than exercises.

Surya Namaskar or the sun salutes are the foundation of our practice. Although they seem very physical — they are devotional in nature. Their main focus is on a moving meditation . . . moving in synchronicity with inhales and exhales, while having bandhas and drishti.

This is where we establish our moving and breathing synchronization which is the heart of this practice--it connects our body, mind, and breath calming the mind while energizing our body, making space for good thoughts, and building a firm foundation which will support the rest of our practice.

In yoga philosophy the Sun represents health and vitality — mentally and physically. By practicing sun salutes they bring health to our body and peace of mind to our head. Health is our greatest wealth, both in the body and mind. When practiced with a meditation in mind the sun salutes gather the strength of the mind developing inner happiness and aiding in mental focus.

The ancient yoga texts state the reason yoga helps us connect to a higher consciousness is due to the inner contemplation of the practice — developing an inner awareness helps us develop a better outer awareness. I'd like to bring back more inner awareness or contemplation into our yoga practice.

Sun Salutes from the inside out — For the heart and mind

Sun salutes and yoga postures stir up a lot of energy in our body. Left undirected this energy can stir up negative issues (negative memories and thoughts), if we make the conscious effort to direct this energy we can use it more productively by thinking about more positive actions, it is helpful to start your practice with an intention. This way you start to reel in the mind and take control of your thoughts!

In Sanskrit this is known as Bhavana, which means “to be” or “to become”. **So in essence you can “dream it”, use your intention to help direct your energy in your practice — dream the positive effects you want from the practice and focus your mind on that.** This helps give our practice inner significance — an inner meaning with a practical method that improves health, clarity of mind, and is spiritually up-lifting.



And of course yoga gives us a tool to use to help — until we develop our own strength of mind and can make your own meditative mantra.

There is a mantra that goes with the sun salutes to help us develop the meditative side of our practice, it is actually more a meditation than a mantra that you just recite. The Rig Veda outlines a meditation that goes with each position of Surya Namaskar A (below). I have found it useful to repeat this meditation in Sanskrit with each position, and again in English while holding Down Dog for 5 breaths.

Here is the mantra from the Rig Veda — with the sun in my mind I meditate on the following:

Om Bhadram Karnebhih Shrnnyaama Devaah =

Om, Oh Deva may we hear with our ears what is Auspicious (conducive to success)

Bhadram Pashyema-Akssabhir-Yajatraah

May we see with our eyes what is Auspicious and Adorable

Sthirair-Anngais-Tusstuvaamsas-Tanuubhih

May we be playful in life with Steadiness in our Bodies and Minds

Vyashema Devahitam Yad-Aayuh

May we offer our lifespan allotted by the Devas for the Service of mankind

Svasti Na Indro Vrddha-Shravaah

May Indra, the Deva of Great Wisdom and Glory, grant us well-being by bestowing us with wisdom

Svasti Nah Puushaa-Vishva-Vedaa

May Pushan, The Sun God, the Nourisher, and the provider of great knowledge grant us well being by

Nourishing us and Granting us Knowledge

Svasti Nas-Taarkssyo Arisstta-Nemih

May Tarkasya, a Mythical Bird of great Protective Power who has a thunderbolt to dispel our misfortunes,

grant us well-being by protecting us from mis-fortunes.

Svasti No Vrhaspatir-Dadhaatu

And May Brihaspati, the Guru of the Devas, grant us Well-Being

OM Shanti, Shanti, Shanti

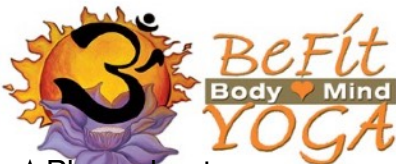
Om, may we recognize we are all one, Peace from Nature (regarding storms and natural events),

Peace with each other, and Peace Within.

This mantra is asking for longevity, hearing and seeing what is pleasant, happiness, health and equilibrium in our bodies and minds, so that we may live a long life free of disease to provide a good service to mankind.

The mantra then goes on to ask for Wisdom, Knowledge, nourishment, to be protected from misfortunes, and asks for general well being. A nice way to start your day :-)

Sometimes I even tweak some of the English words I repeat in Down Dog to suit me or my day or what is swirling in my world to some version of this below (you also can do the same, make it fit you):



- ★Please bestow upon me the good fortune of having only good thoughts
- ★Of hearing and speaking only Satya words and seeing good things (Satya is the Sanskrit word for truth, but it means truth that does not hurt--so you want to speak the truth no matter what, but you don't want to hurt with it no matter what . . . very difficult!)
- ★Of having a sound, strong, light, and pain free physical body
- ★that I may live a long life teaching and speaking words of value and wisdom that many people benefit from, and attain yoga, helping to spread the yoga joy ;).

There is also a mantra for Sun Salute B. Surya Namaskar B is said to benefit the heart — when a beginner first starts practicing sun salute b they find themselves quickly winded, but if you keep with it you will get a stronger and a more cardiovascular-ly fit heart from practicing them giving you a strong heart.

The Rig Veda states that whoever is suffering from heart trouble will find their trouble eliminated if they practice Surya Namaskar B regularly. This is because the surya namaskar B mantra destroys the inner enemies (which if left to manifest will become our outer enemies). The Vedas describe 6 poisons that surround the spiritual heart, recitation of this mantra helps to rid these poisons from our body. They are:

- Desire (kama)
- Anger (krodha)
- Greed (Lobha)
- Delusion (moha)
- Pride (mada)
- Jealousy (matsarya)

According to the Rig Veda by removing these poisons from our body, heart disease will disappear.

The mantra for surya namaskar B is long and complicated, instead I focus my attention on breathing around my heart while holding down dog. I focus on having my breath totally encompass my heart, front to back, side to side, top to bottom, keeping the heart area open and allowing prana to circulate around the heart. Remember this is more dhyana (meditation) than an actual recitation.

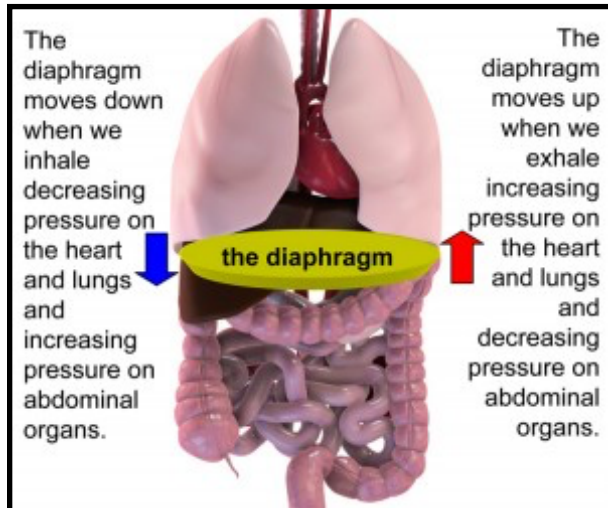
As you begin your practice with sun salutes what is your intension? Make a conscious effort toward the internal contemplation and having a positive intension with each practice.

On your breath in sun salutes, it is important to keep your inhales and exhales the same length as this promotes body and mind equilibrium by balancing the nervous systems and removing stress from the body. This also helps develop the awareness in our practice that reduces the risk of injury while connecting our body, mind. and breath at the start, which helps us maintain that connection throughout our entire practice.

According to the sages-*the first duty is to take care of the body which is the means to the pursuit of spiritual life.* Sedentary lifestyle leads to pain. The practice of Surya Namaskara cures this affliction; sun salutes lead to greater health, creativity, and productivity.

Sun Salutes from the Inside Out for the body

Along with waking us up! The sun Salutes improve our respiratory system, activates our digestive system, and promotes heart health. Here is some info on the physiology of sun salutes:

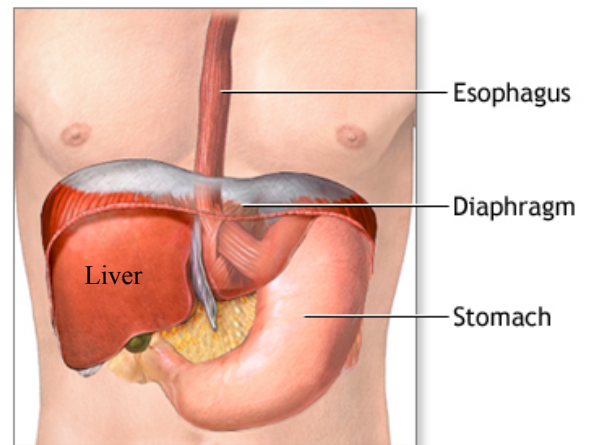


As we inhale and extend our spine lifting our face and heart to the sky — while we hold our pelvis level with the strength of our abdominals — we are creating space above and below the diaphragm allowing more room for it to move up and down in the abdomen which allows for deeper breathing, improving our respiratory system.

Then as we exhale and bend forward the ribs and pelvis come back together like an accordion squeezing and soaking all the tissues and organs in the abdomen helping their function and restoring elasticity.

The forward and backward bending of the sun salute alone

can improve digestion by helping to move matter through your body. When you combine the movements with deep breathing you get even more benefit; your diaphragm sits just on top of your liver and stomach so as you breathe and bend, the diaphragm also massages the stomach and liver aiding them in detoxing and doing their jobs. The space created in the abdomen by the sun salutes also helps to give your stomach the room it needs in your abdomen. Sometimes between stress and an immobile rib cage your stomach gets pushed up against your diaphragm where it starts to adhere to the underside of your diaphragm further restricting movement and increasing the risk of a hiatal hernia.



ADAM.

The vigorous nature of the Sun salutes are competent at improving our heart function, especially when done mindfully with deep breathing. The heart is also massaged by the diaphragm as we improve our mobility of the ribs and diaphragm.

And specifically on the stress response (which helps with heart health), **the improved elasticity of the diaphragm and ribs makes the diaphragm stronger and able to easier stretch low enough on inhalation into the abdomen to draw in sufficient air to get the breath into the lower lobes of the lungs. This is where there is more oxygen, AND this is also where the receptors to the parasympathetic nervous system lie** — the calming side of our nervous system.

As lung elasticity is lost the ability to breath deep into the lower lobes of the lungs is lost, restricting breath to the upper lobes of the lungs which house the receptors for the sympathetic nervous



system (triggering our stress response). When this happens over long periods of time the stress hormones start to break down your body's tissues.

The improved elasticity between our heart and lung, diaphragm and, stomach and liver junction — just from bending forward and backward with your breath as we do in sun salutes helps is preventative medicine!

Benefits of the Sun Salutes:

- ॐ Moving/Breathing Synchronicity - Connecting the moving and breathing synchronicity is the most important lesson in the sun salute. Pay attention to envelope your movement with your breath, at first this may seem challenging (especially in sun salute b) but over time with practice it will become easier. When we synchronize our moving and breathing it is very calming to the mind while energizing to the body, removing stress.
- ॐ They build heat in the body, helping to prepare our body for the practice; and even more importantly it is the heat that helps with the removal of toxins from our organs to our bloodstream to our kidneys and liver where they are processed and removed.
- ॐ They alternate forward and backward bending give a profound stretch to the spinal column and abdomen, keeping the body healthy. The alternating stretch on the legs between up dog and down dog is also very therapeutic for the knees.
- ॐ Improve digestion
- ॐ Improve stomach function by keeping the stomach from adhering to the underside of the abdomen (which leads to heartburn issues, digestive issues and could lead to a hiatal hernia)
- ॐ improve heart function
- ॐ improved lung function
- ॐ Surya Namaskar is good at reducing stress.
- ॐ Improved Sleep
- ॐ Help with weight control (remember the study published in BMJ proving that we break down most of our fat to CO₂ and exhale it out of our body — and this is more effectively down with nasal breathing than mouth breathing)
- ॐ Reduce back and neck pain
- ॐ Improved strength for the back and abs
- ॐ The postures generate prana (energy in our body) by helping all systems move; blood to flow, hormones to secrete, neurons to move, lymph fluid to creep along, and cells to regenerate.

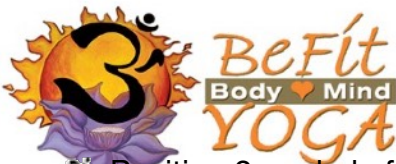
Breathe deep into all 5 lobes of your lungs as many times each day as you can, you have approx. 26,000 times each day to do that.

Practicing Sun Salutes from the inside out

Aside from a mantra in your sun salutes — you can also work with your breath in your body as I talk about when in the poses to breathe into different areas of your body.

For example in Surya Namaskar A - Send your breath to:

- ॐ Position 1 - Inhale reach up and lengthen your body - breathe some space between your vertebrae



- ॐ Position 2 - exhale forward bend - and breathe out toxins, let negative thoughts drain out of the top of your head
- ॐ Position 3 - Inhale head up and breathe in energy
- ॐ Position 4 - exhale to the push up position known as chaturanga - Breathe strong — think strength.
- ॐ Position 5 - inhale into upward facing dog take your face to the sky and draw in the sun. In yogic lore this position represents an awakening after the low point of the previous pose, the arising of knowledge from ignorance
- ॐ Position 6 - Exhale push back to Down dog for 5 deep breaths, relax with deep breathing and your navel drishti — breathe into your digestion — not just digestion of food but also importantly digestion of our life's experiences.
- ॐ Each inhale fills your body with prana, each exhale fans the flames of toxin burning etc.
- ॐ Position 7 - Inhale step/jump forward head up, and breathe in energy
- ॐ Position 8 - Exhale forward bend and breathe it all out
- ॐ Position 9 - Inhale come all the way up and send thanks to the sun.
- ॐ Exhale to samastitih

The practice of Surya Namaskara brings happiness, health, and sunlight to the spirit.

Here is another breathing exercise to help you synchronize rhythm, breath, and body movement. It is essentially a little sun salute ;) This is a short and easy breathing practice that is great to start your day, take a 30 second break from the computer, or release a little extra stress.

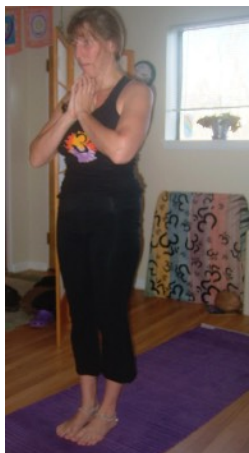
Hasta Utthanasana (Hand Raising Pose) - Oxygenating your body

- ॐ *Standing in samastitih or a mountain pose with relaxed shoulders.*
- ॐ *Cross your wrists low on the front of your body*
- ॐ *Inhale deeply and slowly raise your crossed hands above your head synchronizing your breath and body movement, while gazing upward to your hands as you do this.*
- ॐ *Exhale spread your arms out to the sides and lower them half way so they form a straight line at shoulder level*
- ॐ *Inhale reverse the movement recrossing your hands above your head*
- ॐ *Exhale lower your hands straight down the front of your body, back to starting position.*

Repeat 5-10x

As many times throughout the day you can remember to smooth out your breath and make it deep and rhythmic the quicker it will become habit. The more often you breathe like this the healthier your body and mind will feel. Yoga, its not just for on your mat!

The practice of Sun Salutes requires form, energy, and rhythm.

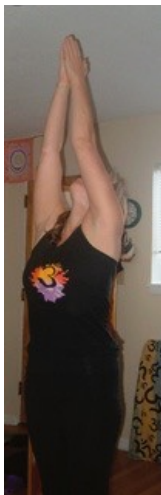


Starting Position: Samasthiti (Equal Standing)

- ☯ Stand with your feet together, toes touching, heels slightly parted
- ☯ Gently contract your thighs lifting your kneecaps
- ☯ Keep pelvis level, create inner lift through your bandhas
- ☯ Relax shoulders down
- ☯ Keep chin parallel to floor and lengthen back of neck

Benefits:

- ☯ Induces a state of introversion
- ☯ Focus of the mudra (anjali mudra, the pressing of your palms together) to make an offering or intention for your practice
- ☯ Activates the anahata Chakra (heart chakra)
- ☯ It is the beginning and end of the sun salute and as such it represents the peace, tranquility, and beauty of the sunrise and sunset



First Position: Hasta Uttanasana – Inhale Hands Up

- ☯ With an Inhale, reach your arms overhead keeping your palms together
- ☯ Keep your pelvis level — many people arch their back here, use strong abs to steady your pelvis as you lift your face and heart to the sky.
- ☯ Gaze up to your thumbs

Benefits:

- ☯ The upward stretch gives traction to the spine helping to maintain health of the discs
- ☯ When performed with an inhale it massages the abdominal organs and aids in digestion
- ☯ Removes roundness of the back
- ☯ Prana is moved upward
- ☯ This pose affects the Vishuddi Chakra and the thyroid gland speeding up metabolism.
- ☯ This pose is indicative of drawing in the energy of the newly risen sun, not only via the breath but every pore in your body. This is the energy we will use to dive into our busy days.

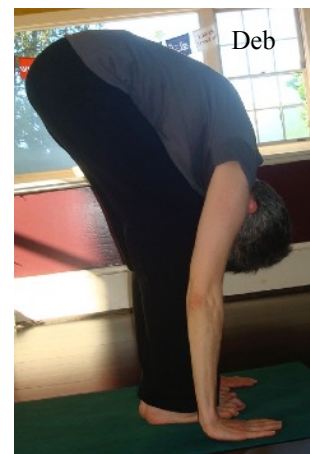


Second Position: Exhale – Uttanasana

- ☯ On Exhale bend forward at your hips (keeping your waist long —ribs away from hips)
- ☯ Ground your palms on either side of your feet—even if you need to bend your knees to do this--See picture of Deb
- ☯ Spread out your fingers
- ☯ Tuck your head in toward your knees
- ☯ Gaze past the tip of your nose

Benefits:

- ☯ Combines the effects of a forward bend with an inversion massaging the abdominal contents.
- ☯ The whole abdomen is toned eliminating constipation
- ☯ Good blood flow is encouraged to the spinal nerves
- ☯ Emphasis is on the Swadhisthana chakra (2nd)
- ☯ Prana is channeled to the lower regions of the body, motivated by exhalation



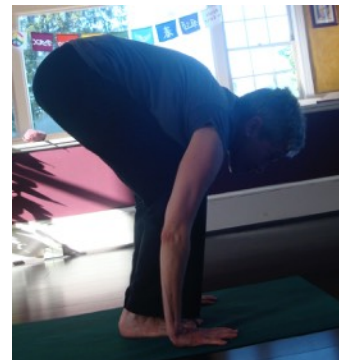


Third Position: Inhale – Head Up

- ☯ Keeping your hands grounded inhale look up lifting your head and heart, if your hamstrings do not allow you to straighten your knees, bend your knees to keep your palms grounded and make the pose FEEL GOOD.
- ☯ Pay attention to lift your heart area and not just throw the head up
- ☯ Lean your body weight forward into your hands

Benefits:

- ☯ Prepares us to jump back
- ☯ Counter-stretch on the spine
- ☯ Improves posture and strengthens the back and neck.



Fourth Position: Exhale – Jump Back to Chaturanga Dandasana

- ☯ On exhale step or jump back to push up position

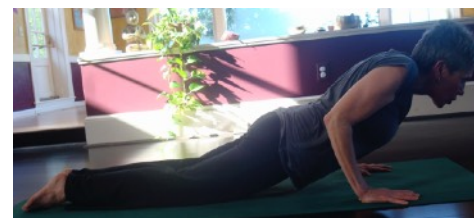
- ☯ Your forearms down by your waist
- ☯ Wrists under your elbows

- ☯ Engage abdominals and do not let back sag! If you are too weak to not let your back sag, or have shoulder issues, you may need to bend your knees to do the pose safely until you gain strength--see picture above.
- ☯ Gaze past the tip of your nose keeping your CHIN UP
- ☯ Fully exhale before moving into next pose

Benefits:

- ☯ Strengthens chest, arms, shoulders, and abdominals
- ☯ the jump back wakes you up!

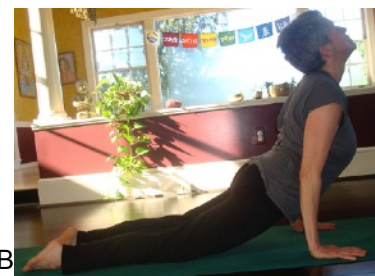
- ☯ Stimulates Manipura Chakra (3rd)



Fifth Position: Inhale – Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

- ☯ On Inhale Roll forward uncurling your toes and pushing through to the tops of your feet. Lift your torso up and back, push down with hands and lift chest in opposition
- ☯ Pull your hips to wrists as you extend upward and backward
- ☯ Lift your knees off the floor, Contract gluteals and thighs, point legs back. Slide shoulders down and back, If possible only your hands and feet touch the floor. Again if strength or shoulder/back pain do not allow you to keep your thighs off the floor, allowing your knees to rest

on the floor may be helpful--just be careful to work toward building your strength and posture over time to be able to do the pose with your knees off the



floor.

☯ Another option here is to lower all the way down to the floor and do a baby cobra pose — just lift your head and shoulders off the floor with the strength of your back muscles (not your arms).

☯ Head is back and Gaze is down.

Benefits:

- ☯ Relieves tension in the back muscles and spinal nerves as it stretches each vertebrae from top to bottom.
- ☯ Corrects posture.
- ☯ Relieves many ailments such as asthma, constipation, indigestion, kidney and liver problems
- ☯ Prana tends to move upward but we want to place our attention at the Swadhisthana chakra in attempt to stimulate prana at the source of the upward flow.
- ☯ Represents the awakening after the low point of the previous pose, the arising of knowledge from ignorance

Sixth Position: Exhale – Adho Mukha Svanasana–5 breaths

☯ On exhale lift hips by picking up from your abdominals, push back with arms as you press chest back toward thighs, bend your knees if necessary.

☯ Allow your head to relax between your arms, gaze toward navel.

☯ Hold this position for 5 breaths.



If you are a member of the “tight hamstring club”, you have a couple options of ways to do your down dog:

☯ Bend your knees as in the photo of Patrick, this will allow you to keep your spine straighter. or

☯ to deepen the hamstring stretch, keep your legs straight and work to move your hips back. This may cause your back to round, if you have any back issues this way is not recommended--however if you have a strong back this position will stretch your hamstrings better.



Benefits:

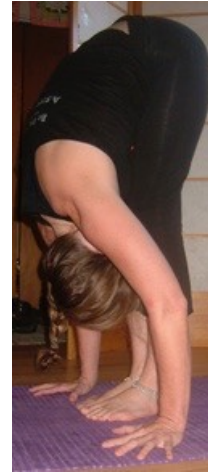
- ☯ Strengthens abdominals, arms, and wrist
- ☯ Stretches calves, hamstrings, and Achilles tendon, chest and shoulders
- ☯ Relieves varicose veins
- ☯ Relieves spinal compression, like traction for the spine
- ☯ Because the drishti (gaze) is toward the navel, the head position stimulates Vishuddi Chakra (5th)



Finish Sun Salute as you began:

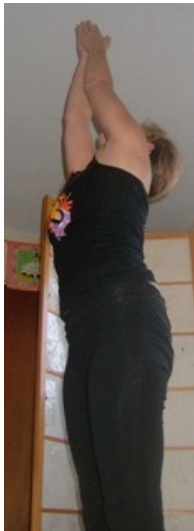
Seventh Position: Inhale – Jump Up, Head Up

Eighth Position: Exhale – Forward Bend



Ninth Position: Inhale – Hands Up

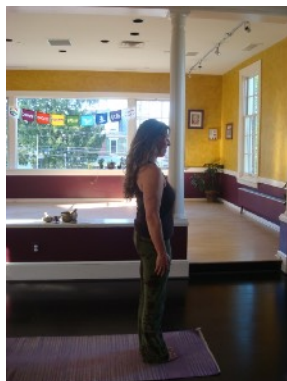
Exhale – Samasthitih



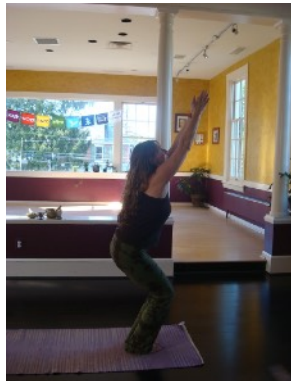
Surya Namaskar B

The Second Sun Salute is a little longer than the first, it too requires energy and rhythm. Since it is a bit longer you will feel it affect your breathing; over time practicing sun salutes will improve your fitness! I will only give detailed info on the new poses, see Surya Namaskar A for details on other poses.

Samasthitih

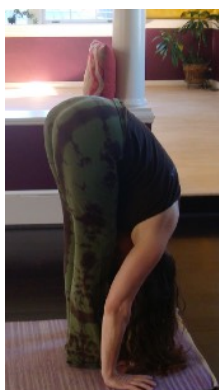


First Position: Inhale – Utkatasana



- ☯ On Inhale squat down to a demi-squat position, shifting your body weight toward your heels but keeping weight on all four corners of your feet
- ☯ keep your arms just in front of your cheeks (reaching the arms back to far strains the shoulders)
- ☯ bring your palms together
- ☯ look to your thumbs

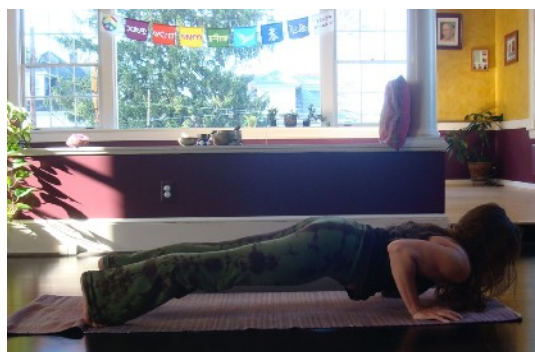
Second Position: Exhale – Uttanasana



Third Position: Inhale – Head up



Fourth Position: Exhale – Chaturanga



Fifth Position: Inhale – Upward Facing Dog



Sixth Position: Exhale – Downward facing Dog



7th Position:

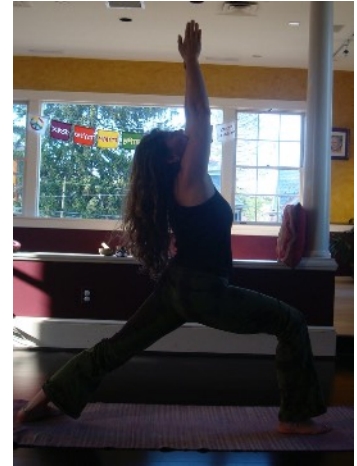
Inhale

- Virabhadrasana

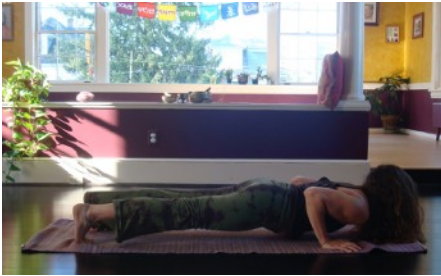
☯ turn your left foot grounding your heel, step your right foot forward up toward or between your hands, straighten your back leg, bend your front knee



☯ Inhaling reaching your arms up, palms together, looking to your thumbs
☯ Stepping forward from the downward dog position will be challenging if you have tightness in your hips--in this case you may feel the need to take an extra breath here; for awhile, that is ok . . . be careful not to hold your breath while trying to keep rhythm. Also you may take a shorter stance or even use your hand to help get your foot forward.



**8th Position:
Exhale - Chaturanga**



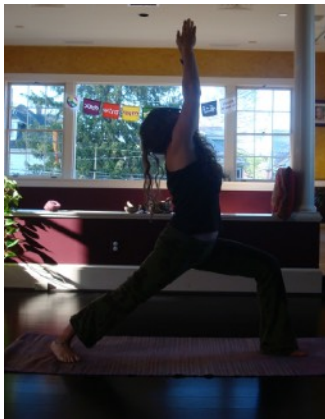
**9th position:
Inhale - Upward Dog**



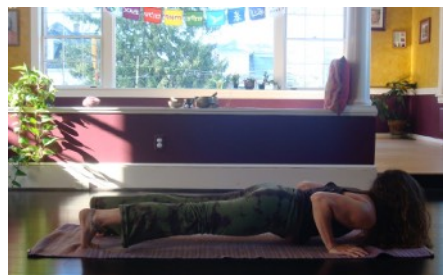
**10th Position:
Exhale - Down Dog**

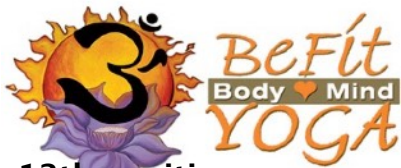


**11th Position:
Inhale - Virabhadrasana Left Leg**



**12th Position
Exhale - Chaturanga**





13th position:
Inhale – Upward Dog



14th Position:
Exhale – Downward Dog



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15th Position
Inhale Jump Forward Head Up



16th Position
Exhale – Uttanasana



17th Position
Inhale – Utkatasana



Exhale Samasthithi

