

The Primary Series of **Ashtanga** **Yoga**

by Caroline Klebl

**T**he Ashtanga Vinyasa System includes a primary, an intermediate and advanced series of asanas (postures) as well as a pranayama (breath control) sequence. A practitioner of ashtanga yoga progresses through one series into the next, over many years of daily practice. Each series consists of a set of unique asanas and vinyasa, which focus on the opening and strengthening of various aspects of the body. The practice of each series commences with surya namaskara (sun salutations) and standing postures and is completed with urdhva dha-

nurasana (the upward facing bow) and the finishing sequence. The finishing sequence includes salamba sarvanghasana (shoulderstand), matsyasana (the fish), shirsasana (headstand), padmasana (lotus) as well as a number of additional associated asanas and vinyasa. A primary series practice begins with surya namaskara A and B and continues with the standing sequence. The postures which are unique to the primary series begin with utthita hasta padangustasana (extended hand to big toe posture) and end



*Utthita hasta padangustasana*

with setu bandhasana (bridge lock posture). Most of the postures of the primary series are forward bends and hip openers. The forward bends lengthen the back of the spine and strengthen the arms and abdominals. The hip openers create structural alignment and flexibility in the hips, pelvis, knees and ankles. These postures drop the awareness into the lower regions of the body and squeeze the organs in the abdominal region, which encourages the organs to detoxify. The primary series stimulates apana vayu, the downward moving breath, which governs the

evacuation processes. The primary series is referred to as “Yoga Chikitsa”. Yoga Chikitsa is defined as providing health and freeing the body from disease by practising Yoga. The practice of the intermediate series is referred to as “Nadi Shodhana” or the purification of the nadis. The Nadis are the network of energy channels, which underlie the physical form and have been related to the nervous system. The advanced series is named “Sthira Bhaga” or the stabilization of radiance.

*Setu bandhasana*



*Lolanasana*

The primary series consists of over seventy asanas, the practice of which, takes about one hour and forty minutes. Surya namaskara (the Sun Salutations) warm up the body and activate the breathing system. The standing postures strengthen the legs, activate the major muscle groups and create large movements in the joints. The seated postures and forward bends focus on awakening the lower regions of the body and lengthening the back of the spine, which creates space between the vertebrae. Between each seated posture, there is one vinyasa. This vinyasa includes lifting up into lolanasana (the swing posture), extending the legs back into chaturanga dandasana (the four limbed staff posture), inhaling into urdhva mukha svanasana (upward facing dog posture), exhaling into adho mukha svanasana (downward facing dog posture) and then jumping back through the arms to seated.

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*Janu sirsasana*



This vinyasa is a subsection of surya namaskara. It strengthens the arms, abdominal and back muscles, maintains heat in the body throughout the practice and activates the cardiovascular system. The primary series continues with urdhva dhanurasana (the upward facing bow posture) and standing up from urdhva

*Garbha pindasana*



dhanurasana, which opens the lumbar(lower) spine in the backbend, and intensifies the focus on the legs, hips and pelvis. The postures in the finishing sequence invert the body, which draws the blood out of the legs and pelvis into the head and ribcage, before deepening the breath in padmasana (lotus posture) and its variations. After the practice it is advised to lie on the back and rest, without imposing any effort on the body or breath.

The primary series is the foundation of and gateway into the Ashtanga Vinyasa system. It takes several years of daily practice for the postures and practice of the primary series to be integrated. The importance of this series cannot be overemphasized. The strength of the practice of the primary series determines the depth of the ability of the yoga student to progress in the intermediate series, the strength of which allows the yoga student to access the postures of the advanced series. The practice of the intermediate series is begun by adding one posture of the intermediate series at a time to the primary series after setu bandhasana, until about one half of the intermediate series is added, then the primary series is dropped. Once the practice of the intermediate series is isolated, the practice of the Primary series is maintained by practising it once a week. The Ashtanga Vinyasa System is to be practised under the guidance of an accomplished practitioner and qualified teacher.

The primary series is an elaborate collection of postures and vinyasa. The practice of the Primary Series restores the body to a radiant state of health and the mind to an equanimous state of contentment.

The yoga asanas were demonstrated by Ashtanga Yoga instructor Caroline Klebl. She is featured in a 2008 Yoga Calendar and teaches workshops, teacher trainings and retreats in the US and internationally. To view her present teaching schedule and to purchase the Yoga 2008 Calendar please visit her website [www.sourceofyoga.com](http://www.sourceofyoga.com).