



Ashtanga Yoga is translated from Sanskrit as the eight steps of Union. These eight steps were defined by the Sage Patanjali over 2000 years ago in the *Yoga Sutras*. The eight steps are **Yama** (restraints), **Niyama** (observances), **Asana** (posture), **Pranayama** (breath control), **Pratyahara** (withdrawal of the senses), **Dharana** (concentration), **Dhyana** (meditation), and **Samadhi** (absorption). These combined techniques are found to be an effective method for realization of the self and ultimate liberation from suffering.

The Yamas are the moral codes, which free the mind and life of a yoga practitioner from undesirable thoughts and feelings resulting from incorrect actions. The Yamas include **Ahimsa** (non-violence), **Satya** (truthfulness), **Asteya** (non-theft), **Brahmacharya** (preserving vital energy) and **Aparighraha** (non-envy).

The Niyamas are those thoughts and activities, which promote a state of mind that is conducive to yoga. The Niyamas include **Saucha** (cleanliness), **Santosha** (contentment), **Tapas** (heat from the practice of austerities), **Svadyaya** (chanting in reference to the study of the supreme), and **Ishvara Pranidhana** (surrender to the supreme).

The Asana practice is the gateway into the steps of Ashtanga Yoga. Asana practice is a tangible method of awakening and purifying the subtle energy channels in the body. **Oujai Pranayama** (a sound-induced breath-

ing technique) activates this process. The practice of asana and pranayama clears impurities of out the body and induces a deeply meditative state. Thereby, dysfunctional behavior patterns are naturally abandoned. Therefore, the first and foremost means to attaining realization by Ashtanga Yoga is to focus on the asana practice.

The Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga System is a method of asana practice which was described in the *Yoga Kurunta* by Vamana Rishi. This sacred text was found by Krishnamacharya and passed onto his disciple Pattabhi Jois. The *Yoga Kurunta* describes a precise method of asana practice, which includes hundreds of asanas, which are divided into primary, intermediate and advanced series of postures. It is also instructed that Vinyasa is an essential element of asana practice. Vinyasa utilizes either the inhaling or exhaling breath to move the body in and out of the postures. The continuous movement between the postures, creates internal heat, which eases the body into the asanas. In the *Yoga Kurunta* it is mentioned to only practise asana with Vinyasa.

The Ashtanga Vinyasa method is accompanied by **Oujai Pranayama** (sound-induced breath), **Dristi** (the looking place in the postures) and **Bandhas** (locks or seals, involving muscular contraction at the base of the pelvis, the abdomen, and the throat). These actions are applied in the postures and throughout the Vinyasa. The application of Vinyasa, Oujai Pranayama, Dristi and

Bandhas to Asana practice is what makes the Ashtanga Vinyasa method safe and highly effective. These principles are applied throughout the Primary, Intermediate and Advanced series of postures. Each series of postures is to be practised on a daily basis for a number of years, and then continued on a weekly basis, when a new series of postures is added.

Each series is learned by adding one posture at a time, under the guidance of an experienced practitioner and qualified teacher. Even though it seems that the Ashtanga method prescribes the same practice to everyone, by adjusting when new postures are added and the length of time each practitioner is advised to practise a series of postures, the practice is individualized. This individualization accounts for the need to strengthen unique weaknesses in each practitioner.

In order to access the depth of Ashtanga Yoga, it is instructed by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* that practice needs to be firmly grounded, by correct cultivation over an extended, uninterrupted period of time. Similarly the Ashtanga Vinyasa method is to be practised on a daily basis for many years, in order for the practitioner to experience the profound benefits of this practice.

The Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga is practiced six days a week. Saturdays are the traditional rest days. The other days on which practice is suspended are on the new and full moon days and for women the first three days of

menstruation. The practice is also progressively reduced during pregnancy and then suspended for up to three months after giving birth.

Before starting the practice of the postures, which are unique to a specific series, the **Surya Namaskara** (Salutations to the Sun) and six fundamental standing postures are practised.

“Surya Namaskara is the ultimate workshop of the Sun God.”

— Sri K Pattabhi Jois

Traditionally Surya Namaskara is practised facing the rising sun. This is the ideal time for asana practice, early in the morning before breakfast. If one does practise later in the day, it is best to wait 2 to 3 hours after a meal to commence yoga practice. Surya Namaskara consists primarily of Vinyasa; the only posture which is held for five breaths is Adho Mukha Shvanasana (downward-facing dog). The practice of Surya Namaskara creates heat in the body, awakens the breathing system and offers a wide range of movement to the body. In the Ashtanga Vinyasa System, there are two types of Surya Namaskara, each of which is practised five times before starting the Standing Postures. Surya Namaskara A is composed of five postures, to which two postures are added in Surya Namaskara B.



सूर्या नमस्कार

Caroline Klebl's guide to the Salutation to the Sun



The first posture of Surya Namaskara A is **Samastithi**. Samastithi means equal standing. The feet are together, the legs are straight and the arms extend down either side of the body. The spine is straight, the inhaling breath lifts the ribcage and the exhaling breath draws the navel back to the spine and contracts the muscles in the pelvic floor. To reach the first position (**Ekam**), on the inhaling breath, the arms are drawn up over the head until the palms of the hands touch. The head tilts back and the gaze rests on the thumbs.

The second position (**Dve**) is **Uttanasana**, a standing forward bend. On the exhaling breath, the arms are stretched out to the sides and down to the floor on either side of the feet. The hips are drawn back slightly as the torso folds down over the legs. The legs remain straight, as the head is pulled in to the legs and the gaze rests at the tip of the nose.

The third position (**Trini**) is reached on the inhaling breath. The head is lifted until the spine and arms are straight. The eyes look up into the forehead, the sit-bones lift and the legs remain straight.

The fourth position (**Chatvari**) is **Chaturanga Dandasana**, the four-limbed staff posture. The palms of the hands are grounded into the floor, the head remains lifted and on the exhaling breath the hips are lifted and the feet extend back until the body is straight. The elbows bend as the toes land on the floor. The elbows are eventually held directly over the wrists, bent at a 90-degree angle. The head remains lifted, with the eyes looking up into the forehead.

To enter the fifth position (**Pancha**) the inhaling breath pulls the ribcage forward and up as the arms straighten into **Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana** (upward-facing dog). As the torso moves forward between the arms and the head tilts back, one rolls forward over the toes until the toes point straight back. Only the tops of the feet and the palms of the hands press into the floor. The knees and thighs do not rest on the floor. The legs remain firmly engaged and the legs are kept straight in each asana of Surya Namaskara A.



The sixth position (**Shat**) is **Adho Mukha Shvanasana** (downward-facing dog). On the exhaling breath, the hips are lifted up as the heels reach back to press into the floor and the torso is straightened, lining up with the angle of the arms. The head drops through the arms and the chin is drawn into the chest as the gaze shifts towards the navel. The fingers are spread as the palms of the hands reach out from the shoulders. The arms are parallel, shoulder width apart. The feet are hip-width apart and the toes point straight forward. This posture is held for five breaths.

The breath is even and smooth. The inhaling breath equals the length of the



exhaling breath. At the end of the fifth exhale, the hips are again lifted as the feet are drawn forward between the hands. The feet are again together when they land on the floor. On the inhaling breath, the legs, spine and arms are straightened as the gaze returns to the centre of the forehead, into the seventh position (**Sapta**) of Surya Namaskara A.

Uttanasana (standing forward bend) is the eighth position (**Ashtau**). The legs remain straight as the head is pulled into the legs and one looks to the tip of the nose on the exhaling breath. Then the head is lifted as the gaze is shifted to the centre of the forehead. The inhaling breath lifts the torso back up to standing, as the arms reach out and up into the ninth position (**Nava**). Here the palms press gently together, the head is tilted back and the gaze rests on the thumbs. Then on the exhale, the arms reach out and down to either side of the torso, the chin is dropped until it is parallel to the floor, and the gaze rests on the tip of the nose in Samastithi.

Surya Namaskara A is repeated 5 times, before starting Surya Namaskara B.

Surya Namaskara B includes two additional postures. The first posture is **Utkatasana** (the fierce posture). Utkatasana replaces Ekam and Nava, the first and ninth position of Surya Namaskara A. Instead of just inhaling, the arms above the head, the knees are bent as the arms are raised above the head. It is important to keep the feet together, the knees touching and the arms straight in this posture. The drishti is to the thumbs and the palms of the hands are pressed gently together. Utkatasana is the first (Ekam) and seventeenth (**Saptadasha**) position of Surya Namaskara B. The second

position (Dve) is reached on the exhaling breath, the arms are straightened and lowered to the floor on either side of the feet as the legs straighten into Uttanasana. The next postures and breaths are the same until Adho Mukha Shvanasana. Here, the second new posture is added. Adho Mukha Shvanasana is held only until the end of the exhale and on the inhaling breath the right foot steps forward, between the hands. As the right leg steps forward the left leg rotates externally, until the heel of the left foot touches the floor. The right leg bends until the

knee comes slightly forward over the ankle, the left foot reaches back and the hands reach out and up, until the palms join together above the head. The head tilts back and the gaze rests on the thumbs.

Virabhadrasana (the warrior posture) is the seventh position (**Sapta**). On the exhaling breath the hands are placed down on either side of the right foot, the right leg steps back next to the left leg and the body is lowered down into Chaturanga Dandasana. The postures and breath continue through Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana and Adho Mukha Shvanasana. Then the left leg steps forward and Virabhadrasana is entered and exited in the same way on the left side.

Virabhadrasana, on the left side is the eleventh position (**Ekadasha**) of Surya Namaskara B.

Again the body is lowered into Chaturanga Dandasana. The inhale pulls the rib cage forward and

up into Urdhva Mukha Shvanasana and the exhale lifts the hips, which pull the spine back into Adho Mukha Shvanasana. The chin is drawn in towards the chest as the drishti returns to the navel. Here, Adho Mukha Shvanasana, the fourteenth position (**chaturdasha**), is held for 5 breaths. At the end of the fifth exhale, the hips are lifted and the feet hop back between the hands. Inhaling, the legs straighten and the head lifts until the arms are straight. Exhaling the torso folds forward and down into Uttanasana and the head is drawn into the legs. On the inhale the knees bend, the arms are reached out and up until the palms touch, the back arches and the head tilts back and the gaze returns to the thumbs. This, the seventeenth position (saptadasha), is the second time Utkatasana is entered. From here, on the exhale, the legs straighten, the arms are extended out and down to either side of the body, and the chin lowers as the gaze drops back down to the tip of the nose into Samastithi.

Surya Namaskara B is also practised 5 times. It is more challenging than Surya Namaskara A. At first one may need to take additional breaths stepping into Virabhadrasana. It is better to take an extra breath than to hold the breath for a long time. But as soon as one is familiar with the postures and vinyasa of Surya Namaskara B, extra breaths should be avoided. The breath becomes even and smooth from the practice of Surya Namaskara. The breath guides the movements and deepens the postures.

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Surya Namaskara A and B prepare the body for the rest of the practice.

It takes only a few minutes to practise Surya Namaskara A and B. These postures are practised every day. When the postures and sequences are committed to memory and the breath stretches comfortably through the 10 Surya Namaskara, then the standing postures are added one at a time. At the end of any practice, one may lie down on the back and rest in Shavasana (the corpse posture) for a few minutes.

Sanskrit count of Surya Namaskara B

Samastithi — Ekam, Dve, Trini, Chatvari, Pancha, Shat, Sapta, Ashtau, Nava, Dasha, Ekadasha, Dvadasha, Trayodasha, Chaturdasha, Panchadasha — Samastithi.