

Postures in Practice – A series of articles on āsana by Paul Harvey

Part Two – Growing from our Roots with Tādāsana

This is the second in a series of articles presenting the core principles for āsana practice as taught to me through many years of personal lessons in India with my teacher TKV Desikachar.

The emphasis in the previous article was on exploring the ground, in many senses, for our practice as Western students coming from many starting points, ages and needs today.

These days students in a general Yoga class may well be there for very different reasons. This could range from the student there for Yoga as relaxation to the one there for Yoga for fitness.

Another student may be there for a therapeutic need looking for recovery from a back problem or support for a chronic condition such as asthma.

Equally students come because at some intrinsic level the soul is asking increasingly searching questions for which the external fabrics and roles of our lives have, at this point, no satisfactory answers.

Of course many students also come to Yoga with a multifaceted need which may include requests at the physical, psychological and emotional levels and, as was my story when beginning āsana practice over 40 years ago, the level of my initial request was not the level of my deeper need. That took, and is still taking time to unfold.

This means that the group Yoga teacher in the West today faces a much more complex situation than in the more traditional Indian setting of times past.

Here the student did not bring a complex, often worldly based and personalised needs agenda, merely an interest or expectation that you “did” the āsana practice because it was there and/or the teacher said “do this posture or technique“.

All in all already a different starting point, or even goal for many of us, as well as being unable to devote many hours to āsana (or āsana alone) given our multitasking lives with family, work and social (media) commitments.

So how to proceed? As my own teacher’s teacher T Krishnamacharya observed:

**“Yoga must be adapted to the person and their situation,
not the person to Yoga.”**

This is where, as suggested in the previous article, we have the principle of vinyāsa krama or the intelligent sequencing of Yoga āsana according to the starting point, needs, potentials and goals of the student.

As students can under reach or over reach according to their inherent tendencies the teacher often needs to be involved in balancing the expectations of the student between goals and potentials.

This is why the Yoga I was taught could be described as both a support and a learning process that evolves from an inquiry into our limitations towards one that extends our potentials.

This means that āsana practice begins with the basics and intensifies gradually in both breadth and depth according to the student's responses to what they have learnt.

Within personal lessons this is easier to evaluate and develop as the focus is on home practice rather than what happens during the lesson. In a group class this is not so easy because of the number and range of students and mixed expectations and realities around home practice being part of the process.

Today's group class students may also be similar in attitude to the person going to the health studio three or four times a week, attending several group classes, even mixing different styles for variety or to experience complementary qualities of Yoga practice.

This may be fine for the student but can be a Yogic headache for the teacher when faced with such complexities. This is further bound together by the common denominator of the student's priorities being set as say Tuesday's at 6.30pm or in today's 'on the way to or from work' even 6.30am.

How to offer a multipurpose group practice with both breadth and depth whilst remaining linked to the goals of Yoga remains a challenge for us all as Yoga teachers today.

Coming back to the primary focus, the previous article offered a starting point in the form of a posture called samasthiti or standing with attention and awareness to help us to draw in our faculties and prepare for the journey into āsana practice.

As we suggested it was both the starting and return point for each standing pose as well as the initial gathering and rooting point for beginning practice. The next step is to explore how it is when we first move the body.

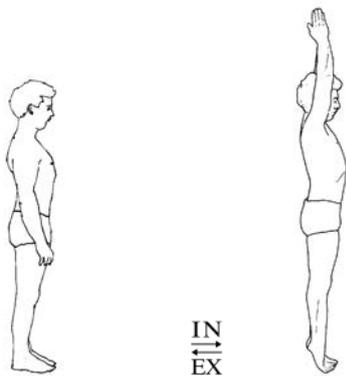
This is where we come to the second pose in our series tādāsana or the straight tree posture, hence the title of this article, growing from our roots. This āsana, on paper, is merely a lifting of the arms with or without the heels at the same time.

However this simple movement of the arms above the head requires the same involvement and quality of attention as a posture such as shoulder stand or cobra. Being near the beginning of the practice and apparently a mild posture in comparison to the more "classical" āsana may mean that we tend to skip giving it depth and attention as it is seen merely as a warm up.

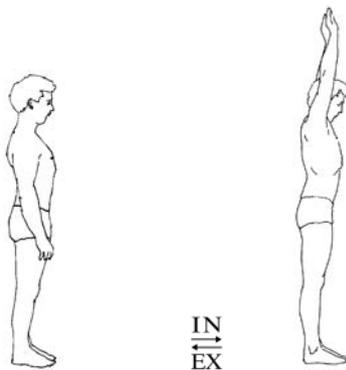
It certainly is a good starting point for exploring movement in the body as it does not involve any undue stress or major change in the position of the spine, unlike forward or backward bends. It also helps prepare the arms and the shoulders for later postures.

Yet the criteria for care–full attention, deep breathing and sensitive movement equally apply. It is the milder nature of the pose that supports our first steps into movement whilst conserving the steadiness of mind, something easily lost in the transition from stillness to movement.

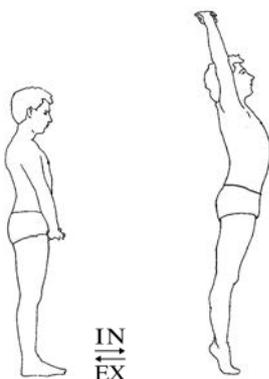
How this physical and psychological focus can be helped is by lifting the heels as we inhale raising the arms and even more challenging, lowering the heels slowly so they touch the ground again at exactly the same time as the arms coming back to our sides.



This aspect is obviously for a reasonably healthy person without any particular limitations on balance. If so the pose can be easily modified by keeping the feet flat on the floor.



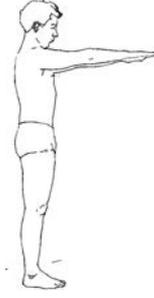
Also in the version of the pose for the more able person the hands are interlocked to add a further dynamic. This can be without the heels lifted if the balance aspect of the pose needs simplifying.



Or in the case of students with no balance issues but with severe shoulder problems the arms can be lifted half way forwards or sideways.



or



Or in the case of problems with balance and limitations in shoulder movement the pose can be modified to incorporate a softer moment of the arms whilst keeping the heels lowered.



Going in the other direction the pose can be varied by lifting the arms and the heel with one leg in a half lotus or half bound angle position. The value of such variations is that they can thematically link into later postures which emphasise the half lotus or bound angle aspects of practice. Here also the challenge can be to maintain the balance aspect of the posture from two directions, that of one leg only as well as the lifting of the heel. Of course the same variations can be used with either the heels raised or the feet flat on the ground.



ardha padma tādāsana



ardha baddha tādāsana

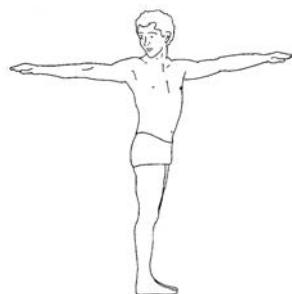
Tādāsana may also be taken further by developing a side bend or twist as a further step from the core pose. This can be also with the heels raised or down depending on ability or emphasis.

Again the value of such variations is that they can link into later postures which emphasise the side bending (parśva) or twisting (parivṛtti) aspects of practice.

The same variations can be used with the feet flat on the ground.



parśva tādāsana



parivr̥tti tādāsana

Or in contrast in all of these options we can incorporate stronger techniques such as bandha. Here we would be using what is known as jālandhara bandha or chin lock within tādāsana to intensify the effect of this and the following āsana.



So to summarise, the role of this article is not to focus on technical detail or top tips for improving our performance of tādāsana. There are many good and useful Yoga books available with a myriad of external and internal pointers.

Also you cannot beat the value of a good teachers eye, ear and voice to offer a mirror that is more reflective than our own sight, at least in the beginning.

For example when we first use tādāsana look at where you are moving from on the inside rather than using just the feeling of the arms.

Learn to use the inner eye to feel how we are being moved and the role of the breath as the mover of the body whilst maintaining the feeling of samasthiti or stillness in the mind.

Whichever you choose as your intention or aim let it be towards the spirit of the Yoga Sutra chapter 1 verse 2.

“Yoga is the containment of movement in the psyche.”

In the next article we will explore uttānāsana or standing forward bend, a natural progression from tādāsana.