

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

Part Three – Moving from our Spine with Uttānāsana



This is the third 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 “Growing from our Roots” and looked at Tāḍāsana, the second Āsana in the series within a general practice.

The first article “Moving into our Bodies” looked at the starting Āsana in the series, Samasthiti, as a pose that offered a means to bring our mind and through it, our deeper awareness to a focussed attention.

With this heartfelt awareness we can harness, as Tenzin Palmo calls it, the mind’s ‘subtle laziness’. She is quoted on this subject by Vicki Mackenzie in her elegant biography of Tenzin:

“One knows how to practice, and that one is perfectly capable.
But one settles for second or third best.

It is like getting the progress prize at school –
and one is not really doing one’s best.

It’s a very low grade of effort and
it is much more serious than having a bad temper.

The times when I have genuinely put my whole self into something,
the results have surprised even me.”

– Cave in The Snow p121.

Making the journey onto the practice mat is beset with a lifetime of learnt patterns of Tamas or inner resistance to the source of real power within us.

Having made the effort we actually practice with a focus that is swayed too easily by the repetitious or rehearsing meanderings of the mind.

The Yoga Sūtra, the gem of a text on Yoga psychology, advises us that our beginnings in establishing a meditative union in practice will naturally include a mixture of words, memory and fantasies around our desired focus.

That union, where there is a mixture of word, object, knowledge and
imagination, is meditation without refinement.

– Yoga Sūtra Chapter I verse 42

The skill here is to include all the ancillary threads of the mind without losing the core focus. The reality is that we can track off tangentially along any of these mental threads and find ourselves completely disassociated with the primary focus.

This is where the quality of steady awareness aroused in Samasthiti pervades all the following postures. This quality of awareness is nurtured and sustained, as in many meditative traditions, by maintaining a link with the rise and fall of the breath.

In Āsana the primary focus for this aspect of breath awareness is the throat centre and the use of a technique called Ujjāyī.

This technique of giving a slight sound to the breath is actualised by first making a light haa sound with the mouth open and then continuing the sound after closing the mouth.

It is maintained, like a cat purring, on both the exhale and the inhale and offers a platform or support for the wandering mind to be delicately yet firmly brought back time and time again.

Some days our practice seems little more than a succession of wanderings and returnings. Yet this process of bringing the mind back to the breath time and time again is ample demonstration of our progress in that we are seeing the mind's relentless wanderings.

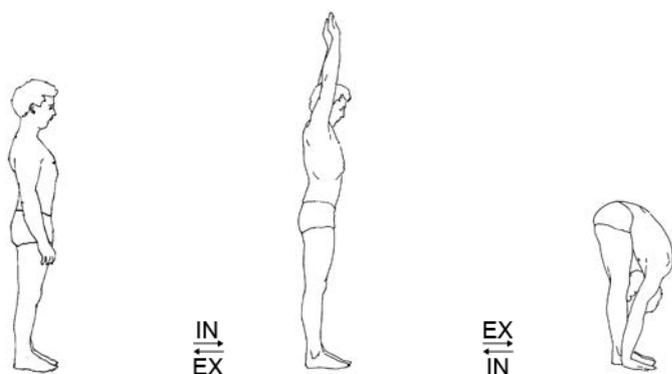
To be able to do this also implies that we are more established in awareness than the mind. After all 'who' is it that notices that the mind has wandered and 'who' is it that brings the mind back to the point of practice?

As Tenzin Palmo discusses a half-hearted approach to and within practice will yield half-hearted fruits and here all we can do is succeed in trying rather than trying to succeed.

This quality of focus, an integral aspect of Samasthiti, is carried forward as the still breath of awareness within the movements of the mind and the body into standing Tāḍāsana and the raising and lowering of the arms.

Tāḍāsana, as well as being a posture in its own right, links us as preparation and anticipation into what can follow next, a full forward bend such as Uttānāsana.

This is the third Āsana in this series and the focus for this article.



samasthiti

tāḍāsana

uttānāsana

Here a pragmatic issue arises, especially relevant for Western bodies today, the question of establishing what are the primary and secondary priorities within any given Āsana.

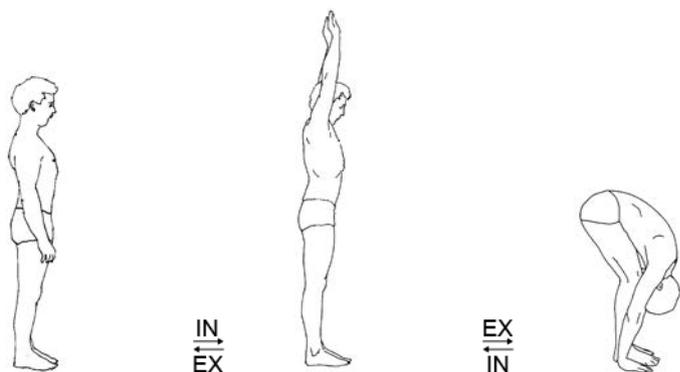
In other words where to adapt the pose and where not to compromise the posture is important. In Uttānāsana or standing forward bend we can look at it and the question of what is the primary focus and what is the secondary focus. From this we can set priorities for adapting the posture when we encounter too much resistance or stiffness from different parts of the body.

In Uttānāsana the primary focus is generally the spine and the secondary focus is generally the legs. This means that when we encounter the tug of war between the back and the legs we yield to the spine rather than compromise the integrity of the spine in favour of hanging onto the straightness of the legs.

The focus in Uttānāsana is to experience optimum movement in the spine as we both go down and come up. If the legs are allowed to be more fluid during the movement, then this fluidity can be transferred to the spine.

This shift in priorities can offer a quality of localised movement to areas of the spine often held rigid due to the limitations of the legs.

A little movement in a lot of places rather than a lot of movement in few places is our adage here.



The stiffness we find in bodies today due to our lifestyle being more homosedens than homosapiens and the later starting age and condition of the general Yoga student means we must often consider the need for adaptation.

The question of whether we should adapt the practice or posture to the student or the student to the practice or the posture remains a moot point according to the approach or the tradition.

However this is a core concept in the teachings I have received from TKV Desikachar and is highlighted quite emphatically in the relationship between the spine and the legs within a pose such as Uttānāsana.

So when to release or straighten the knees?

On the way down when you feel the pressure in the legs comprising the integrity of the spine then release the knees just enough to maintain the optimum work in the spine and transfer the compromise to the legs.

Equally on the way up the knees are braced again only when the upward moving integrity of the spine is established. In both directions this generally occurs around the halfway point.

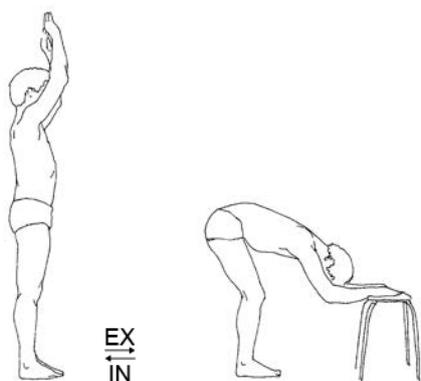
Obviously such modifications are not needed for the student who can maintain full integrity of the spine when moving both down and up.

However for many students this is an important adaptation in accessing work in the different areas of our spine.

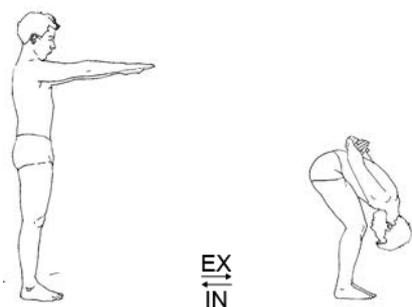
This is the first step into what T Krishnamacharya called “Yoga as surgery without tools” and the ability to work within ourselves on our own structural and systemic processes.

Uttānāsana itself offers a myriad of possibilities in how it can be adapted to vary the workload or area of action according to levels of fitness or health.

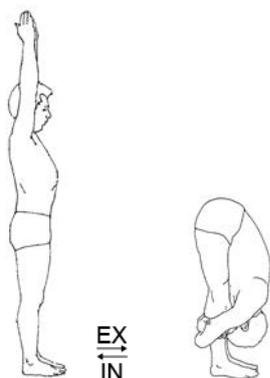
For example if there is vulnerability in the spine then any over lengthening on a potentially weak back can be achieved by limiting movement to a chair.



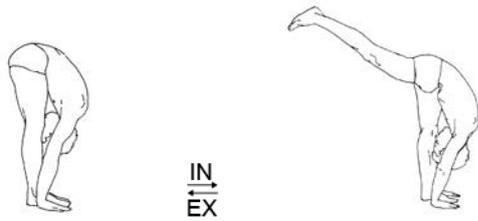
Uttānāsana can also be varied to protect areas of concern such as the shoulders or to reduce the loading on the back as we bend forward, illustrated in this example by sweeping the arms as we go down.



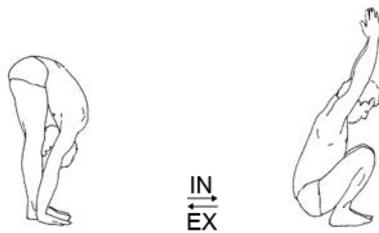
On the other hand if movement is not a problem then the final pose can be intensified through the use of the arms again, but in a different way this time.



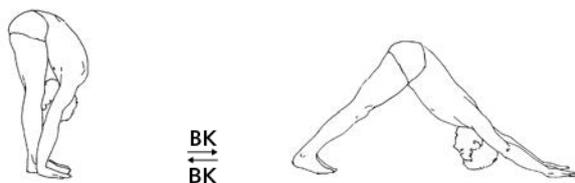
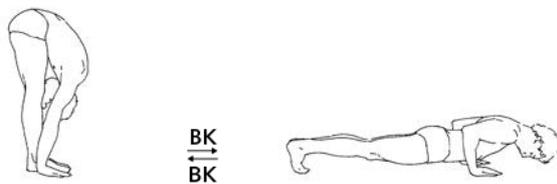
Or Uttānāsana can be varied in a thematic way to link to other poses appearing later in the practice.



If the student is both flexible and strong then Uttānāsana can be combined with other postures such as Utkāṭāsana or the squat pose to provide a different challenge.

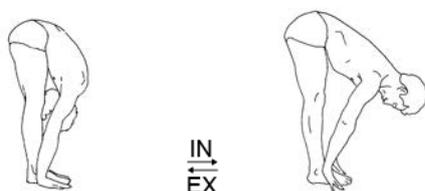


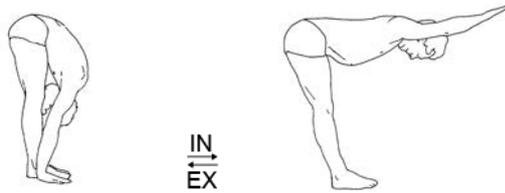
In the same style of work Uttānāsana can become part of a jumping sequence and link to Caturaṅga Daṇḍāsana or Adhomukha Śvānāsana.



In this approach all jumping movements between asana are performed on the pause after the exhale – Bāhya Kumbhaka (BK – outside pot, referring to the concept of keeping the lungs relatively empty).

Suppose we wish to stay in Uttānāsana we could work between either Sthiti Uttānāsana or Ardha Uttānāsana as a means to maintain focus or emphasis.

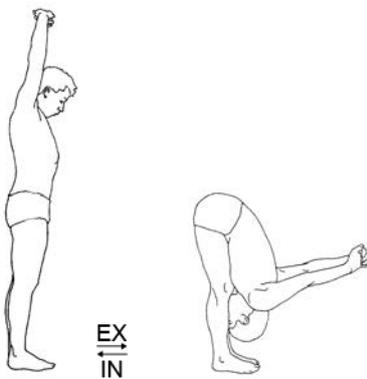




Or in contrast in all of the options for the more able student we can incorporate stronger techniques such as Bandha.

Here we would be using what is known as Jālandhara Bandha or chin lock within Uttānāsana to intensify the effect of this and the following Āsana.

In this example perhaps combining it with a more intense variation of the arms in the pose.



So to conclude, the role of this series is to illustrate the depth and breadth of potential within any one Āsana as well as looking in this article at ways to improve our performance of Uttānāsana.

There are also many ways in which the focus within any posture can be shifted to different levels of experience ranging from the physical body to the emotional self.

For example when we first use Uttānāsana look at where you are breathing from on the way down rather than using just the feeling of the body.

Learn to use the inner eye to feel how we are being moved through the breath and the role of the breath as the subtle mover of the spine whilst maintaining the feeling of Samasthiti or still awareness in the mind.

Whichever aspect you choose as your intention or aim let it be towards the spirit of the Yoga Sūtra Chapter 2 verse 46:

“Firmness and pleasantness is posture.”

In the next article we will explore Utkaṭāsana or standing squat posture, a natural progression from Uttānāsana.