

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

### Part Four – Building our Support with Utkāṭāsana

This is the fourth 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 “Moving from our Spine” and looked at the standing forward bend Uttānāsana, and the distinction between primary and secondary aspects of this, and for many Āsana. With Uttānāsana the spine was the primary aspect and the legs were the secondary focus.

This meant that, if needed, the knees were released on the way down to either maintain or improve the access to the work on the spine.

Obviously if a student can maintain optimum work in the spine keeping the legs straight then no release is needed. However given our starting points in terms of age and our lifestyle and cultural postural habits, this need to release the knees applies to many students, especially in the early stages of practice.

In this article as well as introducing the next posture in the series we will present the principle of directional movement. This concept is one which we can overlook, especially if our attention is over-directed to the form of the posture rather than being equally attentive to the approach and the return aspects (as discussed in the first article on Samasthiti).

Appreciating the relationship between the spine and movement, the spine and the breath and breath and movement can add depth and quality to our overall experience from Āsana.

Here we will look at directional movement as the linking of the movement of the spine to the movement and directional flow of the breath. What this means is that as we breathe with a certain direction so the movement is in harmony with the breath in terms of the direction of the flow.

[Visit website for Postural Pointer 5 –  
Utkāṭāsana and sequence of movement respecting Prāṇa and Apāna](#)

For a healthy student who has the capacity for self practice in their own time certain progressive ideas around the breath are introduced. Amongst these is the directional flow of the breath when moving into and out of a posture.

For example when going down into a standing forward bend such as Uttānāsana the focus for the breath is on the exhale as it is a closing posture and also on the flow and movement of the breath as if from the abdomen towards the chest. Equally when coming up the focus on the inhale and starts in the upper chest and moves down towards the abdomen.

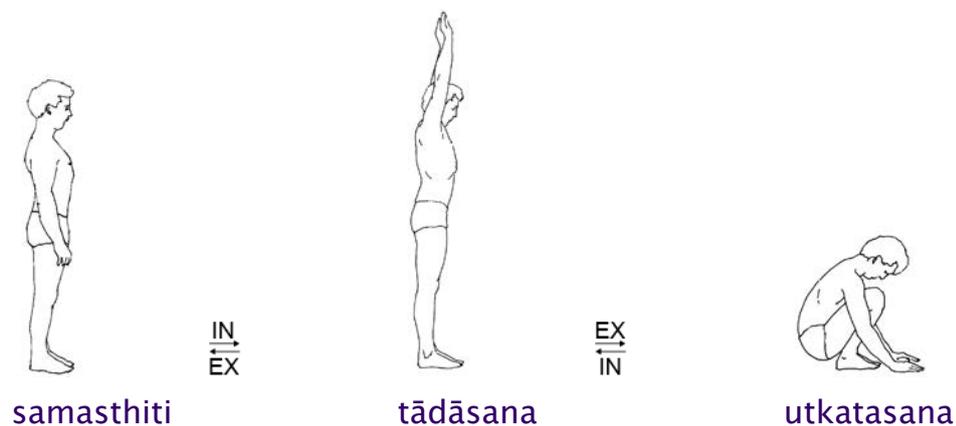
Directional movement respects this concept and enhances it by linking the movement of the spine to the direction and flow of the breath.

So as we link a forward bending movement to the exhale and the abdomen we also ensure that the movement of the spine is from the lower back to the mid back to the upper back, neck and arms. When coming up on the inhale this direction is reversed with the lifting of the arms first, followed by the head, upper back, mid back and finally lower back.

Another example would be with a standing twist. As we go forward on the exhale the movement of the spine is from the lumbar to the chest, to the arms and the neck. On coming up with the inhale the movement is reversed with the neck untwisting, the arms lifting and straightening the spine from the upper back to the mid and lower back.

This principle of directional breathing applies to most Āsana however here we are linking it to the posture in focus for this article – Utkāṣana or Standing Squat posture.

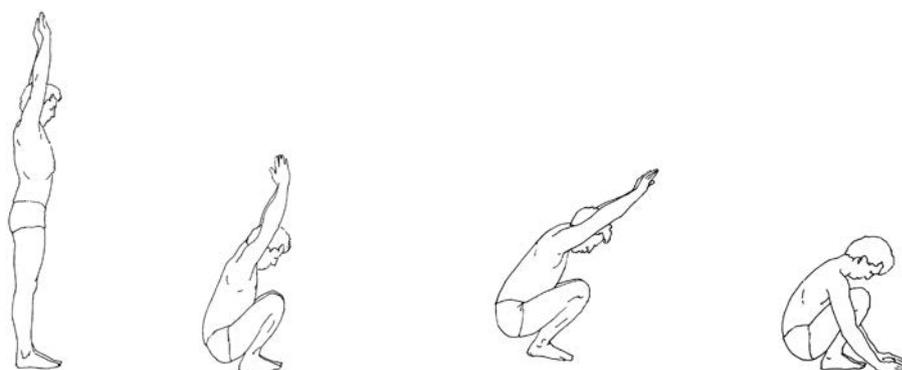
The standing squat pose is approached from Tāḍāsana by first raising the arms on the inhale and then on the exhale lowering the body into the pose and finally lowering the arms to the ground. Coming up we lift the arms, the back and then the hips.



Utkāṣana is an important posture for those without limiting knee problems in that it strengthens the legs and lower back as well as putting the hips and knees into a deep flexion. It also challenges us to build our stamina by both maintaining a length of breath and repeating the posture a number of times without lowering the arms in between.

Once we have the basic movement, breath and stamina in place we can develop the pose by adding directional movement. Here we are very specific about the order in which we lower and raise ourselves into and out of the posture. On descent we lower the backside to the heels whilst keeping the back upright and the arms raised. Then we round the back towards thighs whilst keeping the arms raised. Then we lower the arms to the ground.

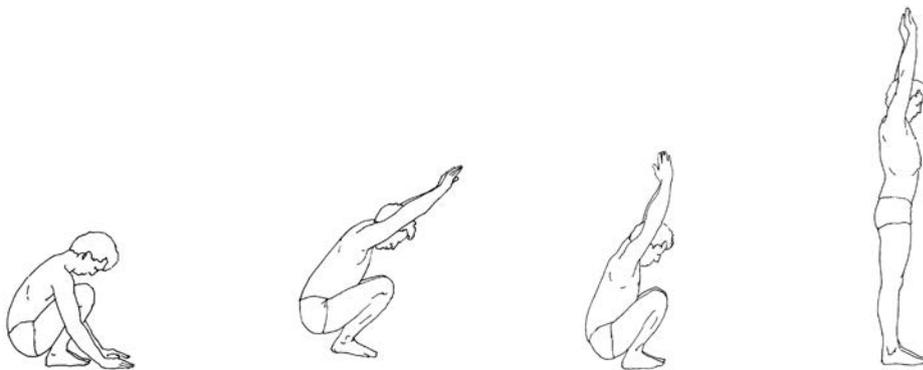
For example:



All these stages of movement are on one exhale

On coming up we raise the arms as far as we can before we straighten the back into and upright position, before finally lifting the backside of the heels and coming up. All this is done on one inhale.

For example:



All these stages of movement are on one inhale

Working in this way both intensifies the experience of the posture on the spine as well as challenging the breath and stamina because of the increased work as we go down and up.

If the student has access to the posture Utkāṣana offers a strong friend for our practice.

Yet for many students this posture remains hard to access without some adaptation. Certainly, unlike say India, the squat is not part of our cultural posture and when faced with the pose we can experience limitations because of stiffness in parts of the body such as the ankle, the hips or the lower back.

For example try squatting keeping the feet flat on the floor and see how far you get. Some students can find they are flexible enough to get into the posture, but whereas gravity helped them descend they are not strong enough to lift their bodies out of it.

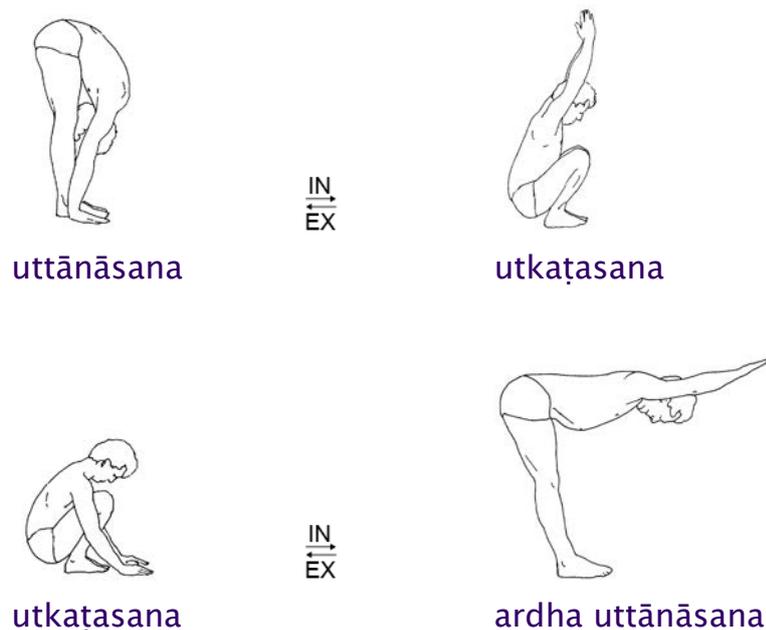
Both situations can be helped by the relatively simple idea of adding a firm support under the heels, though issues of lack of strength need to be worked on through other postures as well. With access to the pose offered by this basic modification we can work on gaining the flexibility, strength and stamina possible from its use.

For example:



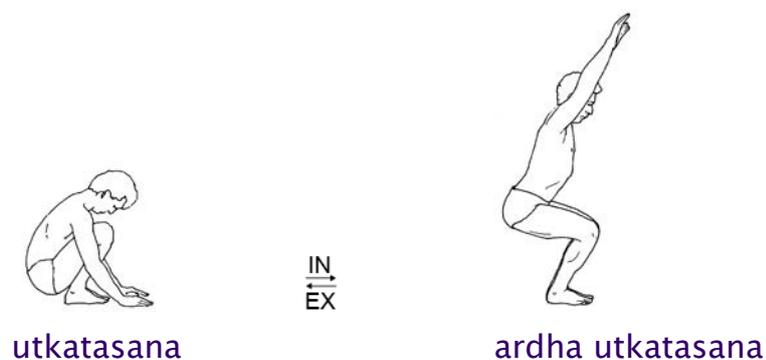
Linking Utkāṣana to other postures can be attempted or those students who are both strong and flexible and find it accessible without support.

For example:



For those who can work well within Utkāṣana can add variations such as Ardha Utkāṣana (half squat) to add efficiency whilst maintaining economy in our practice.

For example:



All in all Utkāṣana offers a way to work at strength, stamina and flexibility, especially of the lower torso and legs. Given how little we use our legs and spine these days it remains a valuable addition to our repertoire of postures.

So to conclude, the role of this series is to illustrate the core principles which add depth and breadth of potential to our Āsana practice as well as looking in this article at examples ways to improve our performance of Utkāṣana.

In the next article we will start to explore examples of lying postures as a modern application of the natural progression from standing postures in our journey from standing to seated and sitting Āsana.