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Awaken the body and mind

The Downward-facing Dog

Stepping onto a "sticky mat" often brings a sigh of relief. It's time to exhale deeply, relax, get centered and be present. It's time to connect with one's self.

When you begin yoga exercises, you might find that your thoughts are preoccupied with all that you've done or have yet to do, and your body is not as supple as you had anticipated. Fortunately, yoga allows for transition time. Most practices begin with an opening phase of gentle yet thorough movements to awaken the body, stoke the breath and cultivate the attention.

Good starting poses facilitate circulation and lead you into your sequences with ease. They address the major joints and large muscle groups, gently awakening the arms, shoulders, legs and hips.

The previous article introduced the Sun Salutation but because it is a complex series of moves, we are going to go through each of the Sun Salutation poses in detail. The first pose is the "Downward-facing Dog" (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*). *Adho Mukha* means "downward-facing" and *Svana* means "dog". This pose warms the body from the tips of the fingers to the toes.

As you segue into your practice be mild and deliberate. Take all the time you need to warm up your muscles, acknowledge your present state of mind, and remember the deep reasons why you are practicing yoga.

Downward facing Dog is the salt of Hatha Yoga and sprinkled intermittently throughout the class from beginning to end. Just as pinches of salt enliven a dish, so Downward Dog enlivens your body, making you feel more vibrant and alive.

In flow classes, Downward Dog is a lot like home base – you do it over and over again to neutralize your spine, bringing it back into its natural alignment. It's also an inversion that prepares beginners for the feeling of going upside down. A pose with so many benefits is worth learning in detail. Even if you've done more "Down Dogs" than you can remember, these preparatory versions will help you rediscover it, refine it, and feel it in all its glory.

When you first try Downward Dog, you may feel tight in areas you never knew existed. Your lower back might "round" and your elbow may bend and bow. But with daily practice, you will grow to love the sensation of unfurling your body into the pose – feeling long and lithe, like a dog stretching after a good nap.



Technique

Lie flat on the floor, face down, on the stomach. The feet should be hip-distance apart.

Rest the palms by the sides of the chest, the fingers straight and pointing in the direction of the head.

Exhale and raise the trunk from the floor. Straighten the arms, move the head inward towards the feet and place the crown of the head on the floor, keeping the elbows straight and extending the back.

Keep the legs stiff without bending at the knees and press the heels down. The heels and soles of the feet should rest completely on the floor, while the feet should be parallel to each other, toes pointing straight ahead.

Stay in the pose for about a minute while breathing deeply. Then as you exhale, lift the head off the floor, stretch the trunk forward, gently lower the body to the floor and relax.

Benefits

Develops suppleness and strength in the arms and shoulders.

Elongates the spine.

Creates greater flexibility in the hamstrings and calves.

Helps calm the nervous system.

A longer stay in this pose removes fatigue and brings back lost energy.

A convenient alternative for those who are afraid to do head stands (*sirsasana*). As the trunk is lowered in this pose, it is fully stretched and healthy blood is brought to this region without any strain on the heart.

Sports Benefits: The pose is especially good for runners who get tired after a hard race. Sprinters will develop speed and lightness in the legs.

Health Benefits: Combats arthritis of shoulder joints.

Contradictions

Do not perform the Downward Dog if you are suffering from a hamstring injury, wrist problems or spinal disc injury.

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