

“Yoga is not about touching your toes, it is what you learn on the way down”.

Cultivating ON AND OFF THE YOGA MAT

Sthira sukham asanam

Asana (posture) should be stable (Sthira) and comfortable (Sukha), Patanjali's yoga Sutras 2:46 – BKS Iyengar

Becoming steady and stable is a process that extends beyond our yoga mat into our daily lives. When we begin to infuse our lifestyle, diet and relationships with **Sthira** and **Sukha**, we pave the way for a life of balance, insight and mindfulness.

These two Sanskrit terms are familiar to many yoga students and are often quoted from an ancient text named '**Patanjali's Sutras**'. So let's shed a little

more light on the meaning of Sthira, Sukha and Asana.

Asana – (asanam) is steadiness and comfort. Steadiness and comfort describe an inner state of being as well as the experience of the physical body in an asana (posture). It is a state of being “seated” in ourselves, of the body being comfortable with the mind, and the mind being comfortable with the body. In this way, the body can support the expansive state of a beautiful, clear, calm mind. The emphasis here is being totally grounded and committed to whatever you are doing when you are doing it

and to “being present” and “mindful”. All too often, we “unseat” our inner ease with a lack of bodily awareness and an untrained mind. This can constrict our inner space and makes us small-minded. On the physical level, we experience this as an inability to breathe and to move freely. Tension settles in our shoulders, neck, pelvis, lower back, and deeper in the organs—and the mind reacts as it recoils from the discomfort.

Balance . . .

“Asana can sharpen our senses, draw the mind back into the body, and anchor our awareness in the ever-calm, ever-clear inner witness”.

Sthira – “the ability to hold steady” in an asana (posture), to hold body, mind, energy and balance for an extended period. This is understood as asana sthiti which translated means “dwelling in an asana” or “steadfastness”. True asana sthiti arises when the muscles are evenly engaged, free of tension, force or strain; when the tempo of the breath becomes rhythmic; the mind becomes patient and vigilant, observing without judgements whatever arises from moment to moment. Sthira denotes effortless while moving into the posture, holding it steadily and moving out of the posture.



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Sukha – or “good space”, in asana practice is the comfort that arises when the joints and bones are harmoniously aligned with gravity and the muscles are free of strain. Mentally this good space manifests as a meditative quality of joy; spaciousness, contentment and happiness. Sukha reflects the natural state of comfort and joy. As your body finds its ease, the mind, breath and emotions align with it. It allows us to feel comfortable in ourselves and connect with the real Self; our inner and outer worlds interconnect.

Cultivating **Sthira** and **Sukha** as we move through our daily lives and tasks helps us to establish a foundation for fully realising our aspirations, for accomplishing our goals and for enduring the challenges and change that we are often faced with in our lives.

The key image to hold in one’s mind is one of “positive inertia”, where **Sthira** and **Sukha** work in unison to propagate an enduring state of equilibrium in all levels of our being, mind and body.

We could simplify **Sthira** and **Sukha** and interpret these two words as Balance.

So how do we cultivate Balance?

Balancing asanas (postures) are challenging for most people and a good way to teach us balance on and off of your yoga mat.

The goal of a posture (your state of being) should be steady, comfortable, and relaxed. We get to this state by embracing the right posture and

alignment. This is about finding the balance: balance between strength and supple, effort and ease, grace and surrender, stability and freedom and relaxation. All of this requires us to look beyond the physical alignment.

When you step onto your mat you bring all of your life with you and logically it should be true that when you step off your mat, you bring all of your yoga with you. That is easier said than done and **Sthira** and **Sukha** reminds us to take our yoga off of our mat and into our daily lives.

“If you stumble make it part of the dance”.

The key to any yoga posture is to pay attention to your body and mind and attempt to be present both on and off of your yoga mat. Notice and pay attention to how you feel moment to moment. If you truly pay attention to the signals you will sense when things are in or out of balance. Many people lead very fast paced busy lives seeking work life balance while juggling careers, family, time, stretching themselves in all directions. If we overburden our mind and body consistently we will end up dwelling with Sukha’s wicked twin **Dukha** or “bad space”, with **Dukha** our postures and life can become, unpleasant, difficult, painful. We can become exhausted, stressed, anxious, impatient, reactive, suffer with digestive problems and may eventually become depleted and ill.

Postures that require balance are

unique in that they often highlight our limitations and weaknesses in an immediate way. How we respond to these limitations is often an indication of our internal state. Balancing of any kind can be scary particularly if we practice arm balances and inversions where we quite literally turn our world upside down.

A tree is a wonderful example of **Sthira** and **Sukha**. When you look at a tree what do you first notice? Maybe you notice its uprightness (alignment), its roots, its connection to the earth (grounded), and its strength to withstand various weather conditions. Trees like people have their destiny and much of the survival of the tree depends on the sturdiness of the trunk and branches, sturdiness that must be balanced with flexibility. The mighty oak tree can break during a storm while the willow swings back from the force of the wind. Ask yourself; “am I unyielding like the mighty oak? Or can I bend with the forces of change”.

What can we learn from a tree that will help us balance our daily lives?

We can learn how to give: A tree gives food, shelter, shade & oxygen.

We can learn to receive: a tree is self-sufficient, but only because it uses what nature has given it. It takes **nutrients** from the **soil, fluids** from the **rain, & warmth** from the sun to help it grow and sustain its natural beauty.

A tree teaches us about change and the **natural cycle of life:** In Spring,



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buds appear - it teaches **birth & rebirth**. In summer, by the warmth of the sun, the buds bloom into leaves or flowers - it teaches us growth.

When **Autumn** arrives the leaves fall to the ground - it teaches **impermanence** and **death**.

In the Winter, the tree appears dead, but it's only **sleeping**, waiting to be **renewed** by the sun in Spring and to begin once again the cycle of change.

The Art of Balancing

We hear the work **balance** a great deal e.g. work life balance, a balanced diet. If we don't take time to balance the doing with the being we can end up getting caught in our hectic daily lives. We get so absorbed in planning for the future or living in the past rather than being in the present moment we can forget to find time to truly relax or eat a healthy balanced meal, find time to exercise, or meditate. The result is that we can find ourselves off centre or feeling stressed. It is important to make time for yourself and to make this a priority, the distractions and commitments will always be there, and you will be more effective at handling them if you start from a place of mindful balance.

When you have a little trouble balancing ask yourself,

- What is happening? Am I fully present mind and body?
- What are the physical challenges for

me at the moment?

- What are the mental challenges I am faced with?

If we 'try' too hard it defeats the purpose because yoga is not about 'trying', 'force' or 'effort'. This is really the whole point of balancing asanas, if not yoga itself. The point is simply to be with yourself, no matter where you are at that moment. Or, as Thich Nhat Hanh says: "Smile, breathe, and go slowly".

Balancing Postures

Balancing requires a leap of faith. We must trust in one leg to hold us, as the other takes flight. We test the limits so we know what we are capable of achieving.

It can be challenging, and for some difficult to face change and to take on something new in life. But it's that mindset that keeps us stuck in the status quo, where most of us lean towards giving to others, rather than nurturing ourselves.

Balancing helps to keep your gaze focused on a steady object, this helps concentration of the mind, and minimises distractions that can throw you off balance.

Balancing on one leg requires strength, but you also need to relax and keep breathing. If every muscle is clenched and tense you are actually more likely to fall over. The micro movements and tiny adjustments are part of the posture, and we can't flow with the breeze unless we let go of a

little bit of control.

Staying in the present means accepting whatever arises without being judgemental, critical or comparing ourselves to others. We can only control our reactions. If we let go of expectations, we can accept whatever comes our way on or off the mat.

Balancing is challenging, and from time to time we may wobble or even fall. Some days, it may seem impossible to find the stillness. Some days we may fall more than others, and we may be tempted to feel frustrated that last week we held a perfect pose, or reacted more calmly to the situations we were faced with. Instead of getting frustrated, smile at your attempts and accept where you are today. With practice, perseverance and in your own time you will progress.

Balancing poses require concentration (Dharana) and when everything comes together, these postures help us find clarity. Balancing on our mat helps us focus our intentions on and off of our mat.

One of the balancing postures I like to practice and to teach is;

Vrksasana (vrik-SHAHS-anna) vrksa = tree

Vrksasana as with many aspects of yoga, not only teaches us **Sthira** and **Sukham** it also teaches us **Pratyahara**, the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Teaching us to cultivate **detachment** from, our senses



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and in doing so, we direct our attention internally. The practice of **pratyahara** provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our habits, lifestyle and general health and wellbeing.

The practice of Pratyahara creates the setting for **Dharana**, or **concentration**. We can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. In the practice of concentration, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object and in Vrksasana this is a visualisation of your favourite tree. In pratyahara we become self-observant; and in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point.

Vrksasana

The possible benefits of Vrksasana are;

- Stretches your inner thighs, groin and shoulders.
- Strengthens your thighs, ankles calves, core, and foot muscles.
- Improves posture and alignment.
- Calms and relaxes the mind and central nervous system.
- Develops balance.
- Increases your mind / body awareness.
- Builds co-ordination, concentration and balance.
- Can help focus the mind and bring balance to the breath.

You may want to practice this posture

near a wall, chair or tree for support. I would also recommend practising this posture with bare feet so that you can feel grounded and a connection with the earth. All standing yoga postures require a good foundation, this means using your feet correctly. Vrksasana helps to strengthen the arches of the feet and ankle joints. One of the key features of finding balance is having a strong stable base and it teaches us 'one pointedness', concentration.

1 Standing in (Tadasana) Mountain Pose, place your feet parallel and either together or hip width apart. Bring your attention to your feet, feel where your weight is in your feet, spread your weight evenly through both of your feet, feel a broadening of the feet. Spread your toes, now lift all of your toes keeping your weight evenly balanced through the both feet, extend your toes and without losing the space or length connect your toes down again to the earth.

2 Stand tall and lengthen your spine, draw your navel gently toward your spine.

3 Soften your face, jaw, mouth and eyes. Stand tall and strong. Close your eyes soften your gaze. Connect with your breath, following the inhale and exhale, breathing slowly and steadily, be mindful of your breath, notice the quality, length and rhythm.

4 Observe your thoughts – observe without letting your mind control your thoughts, and bring your mind to concentrate on the ebb and flow of your breath. Take your time and enjoy the stillness and rhythm of your breath.

5 When you feel fully present slowly open your eyes (if closed). Gaze softly forward – visualise looking out toward the horizon, the point where the ocean meets the sky. Feel your feet connected to the earth, feel your body and breath connected. Feel a sense of growing tall towards the sky – visualise your favourite tree.

6 Keeping your pelvis level, inhale and raise your left leg off of the floor, notice without judgement how your balance is, if you feel steady use both hands to hold below the knee of the left leg, without stooping, keep the spine long and upright, hug the knee close to your body.

7 Release your hands from your left leg and carefully place your left foot anyway on the inside of your right leg e.g. ankle, calf, mid thigh, or upper thigh with your toes pointing down. Keep your pelvis facing forward and level. If it helps take your arms out to the sides for balance or use a prop. Rotate your left knee out to the side while pressing your foot firmly into your right inner thigh.



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8 Bring your palms together lightly, thumbs toward your heart centre, connect once again with your breath. Bring awareness to your navel, keep drawing your navel softly toward your spine. Look out towards the horizon feel as though your heart centre projects towards the horizon and beyond sending out compassion to the world. Feel an inner smile spreading through your whole body, feel a softening as your body yields to the shape of a tree. When you feel steady, inhale and release your hands toward the sky, keeping your shoulders relaxed and away from your ears. Visualise your arms as branches of a tree reaching toward the sky. Repeat the mantra aloud or silently "I am strong, flexible and balanced." Repeat several times. Stay for 5-10 breaths (or longer). Notice how you feel – can you find Sthira and Sukha within this asana, be present to the moment, finding steadiness, ease, comfort, joy, clarity, equilibrium, a sense of being in the moment, steady, strong, uplifted, graceful and calm.

9. When ready to exit the posture, exhale and slowly lower your arms and palms back to your heart centre and softly place your left foot on the floor into Mountain Pose. Release your arms. Keep the steadiness that you have cultivated as you repeat on the other side. If you wobble or stumble – smile and try again and accept this is where you are in this moment.

Remember how it felt when you found **Sthira, Sukham, Pratyahara** and **Dharana** and how this can be cultivated into your daily life?

Modifications

- If you have difficulty balancing, place your hand on a wall or chair for support or keep the left toes touching the floor as the left heel rests against the right ankle.
- Roll up leggings/trousers if the foot slides down the supporting leg.

Contraindications

- Late term pregnancy
- Medical conditions that affect balance, e.g. ear infections
- High blood pressure - don't raise arms overhead
- Low blood pressure

As you will experience **Balance** and stability on your yoga mat is about being mindful and fully present to the moment, being both sensitive and responsive to the relationship to our inner and outer environment. Balance can also be defined as physical equilibrium. In yoga, it is not only physical, but mental and emotional equilibrium. It is equanimity in its fullest sense. Balance does not mean merely balancing the body. Balance in the body is the foundation for balance in life. In whatever position one is in, or in whatever condition in life one is placed, one must find balance.

There are many easy and playful

ways to improve our balance, equilibrium and proprioception (spatial orientation). Once we develop balance, equilibrium and proprioception on a physical level this may, in turn, affect our sense of well-being both in yoga and in everyday life. Through playful, thoughtful and creative practice we learn to be more at ease and stable in an unstable and changing world. This will help cultivate and maintain an attitude that allows for grace in the face of adversity and the support of a deep contentment and stability that radiates as joy from our depths to the surface of our being.

Remember yoga is a journey of transformation so resist the temptation to hurry to your destination – much of our learning comes from the journey itself and not the destination. Through regular yoga practice and meditation, distractions of mind and body become infrequent visitors. The result is our health and wellbeing improves, we feel, look, move and sleep better. We can eventually project these feelings and Sthira and Sukha into our daily lives and hopefully into the lives of others.

If you have never practiced yoga, find the courage to step outside of your comfort zone and into a yoga class. You really are never too old, or too young, you will learn a great deal about yourself, there will be laughter, fun and tears along the way but it will be an awesome and memorable journey.



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