



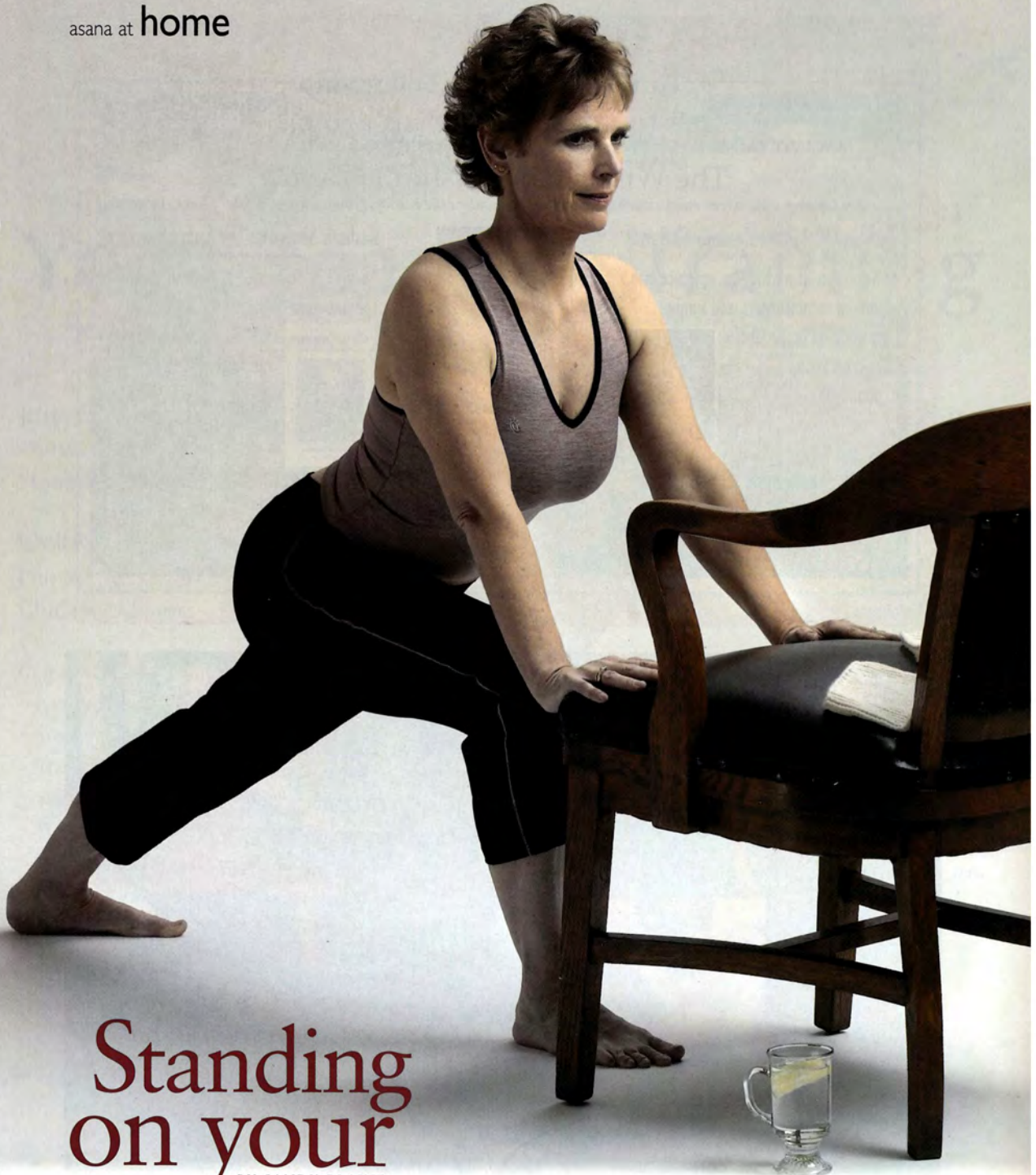
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asana at home

B O D Y W O R K



Standing on your own

BY SANDY BLAINE

88 APRIL/MAY 2004



a sequence for standing poses

Developing an asana practice is easier to imagine than it is to actually accomplish. Finding some quiet time and getting onto your mat is hard enough, but once you're there, figuring out what to do is a challenge. Even if you attend classes regularly, when you're on your own the possibilities can be overwhelming. Or perhaps you do practice at home from time to time but haven't developed consistency. These are common problems. Developing a regular, satisfying practice requires time, commitment, and perseverance.

The first step is to ask yourself why you want to do this; if you don't know, if it's just a vague "should," you won't be motivated. My own motivation comes from realizing I'm a better person on days that I practice than I am when I don't. My asana practice helps me be more mindful and in the present. It awakens a sense of thankfulness, and leaving my mat each day steeped in gratitude gives me a chance to be less identified with the mundane ups and downs of daily life, and more grounded in an awareness of the divine. There are all kinds of reasons for practicing asana regularly, from the desire to expand your sense of yourself to practical health concerns. The only requirement here is that your motivation come from you. Only personally meaningful reasons will sustain a regular practice.

Once your motivation is clear, it is best to start simply. Strive for a sense of ease and steadiness—the mental attitude is what makes asana yoga and not just exercise. It is much easier to monitor your mental state and stay aware and comfortable in the postures when you're not working your body to its maximum

limits of strength and flexibility. So at the outset, save the more challenging poses for classes, and experiment with using your daily practice to maintain your equilibrium. A simple practice will give you a chance to fully inhabit the poses, to focus on your breath, and to be present with your experience. It will also motivate you to keep coming back to your mat.

To be satisfying, practice sessions should be both focused and balanced. When time is short (as it is for most of us) trying to do too much can leave you feeling scattered and frenetic—the opposite of what you want your practice to achieve. In the beginning it is helpful to have a specific focus such as backbends, seated poses, or restorative postures; in time you will learn to vary it based on what your body, nervous system, and mind need most that day.

Practicing on your own gives you the opportunity to tailor your practice to your specific needs. At first you may miss some aspect of being led through a practice, particularly the reminders of where to direct your attention. But with the experience that comes from regular practice, you will learn to follow your inner prompting, and here again, keeping it simple is the best approach. The basic instructions are the most essential. For example, there is nothing more important than learning to connect with the earth by grounding through the feet, and with the sky by lengthening the spine. It is essential that you learn to breathe and to open and relax in whatever asana you're in. As you gently monitor those basic elements, you will feel your >>>





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body, mind, and breath unite, and you can open to the moment as your entire being is infused with the deep nourishing qualities of each pose.

Our purpose in this and future columns is to help those who are already familiar with the basic postures build a home practice. We will present different groups of postures and describe the specific benefits of each, offer recommendations for structuring a healthy practice session, and provide guidelines for shaping a well-rounded practice that meets your individual needs. But no matter what your focus, your asana sequence should be balanced with warm-ups, “counter” or cooldown poses, and relaxation.

Standing poses

Standing poses make an ideal starting point for a home practice because they are the basic grounding and centering asanas. On the physical level, all the postures integrate the body, balancing flexibility, strength, endurance, and coordination. Standing poses work on all of these elements simultaneously, thus giving you a chance to target individual weak points. A series of standing poses moves the body through a full range of motion in every major joint, prepares it for deeper poses, and teaches it to move in an even, integrated way.

A firm foundation is key to the integrity of any structure.

Whether it is a building or a body, the part that contacts the earth must be strong and viable. Standing poses make us aware of our connection with the earth and teach us to be relaxed and balanced on our feet. We can then realign our foundation from the ankles, through the knees, to the pelvis and tailbone, thereby connecting the core of the body to the earth. By creating awareness of alignment, standing poses also cultivate kinesthetic intelligence—an organic understanding of how the body works and moves. This prevents us from exceeding our capacity and thereby injuring our joints. Because standing poses require us to actively engage our awareness of how we use our muscles, joints, and breath, they build both mental and physical stamina as well as discipline. And, as with all the postures, standing poses improve circulation, breathing, and energy; as the body opens, energy flows more freely, and all the body’s systems work more fluidly.

No matter what else you might want to explore in the vast world of yoga, practicing the standing poses will give you a solid foundation, good alignment, an understanding of body mechanics, and tangible training in mindfulness. The standing poses will help you wherever your journey leads—to the most advanced asanas, to a deeper meditation practice, or to simply becoming more aware and joyful in your body.

The sequence that follows takes 20 to 30 minutes and pro-

vides basic maintenance. Think of it as a tune-up. Like your car, your body needs preventative maintenance to keep running smoothly; regular practice of this sequence will keep your muscular-skeletal system in good running order by lubricating the joints and flushing out toxins. It takes you through a number of poses, rotating the arms and legs both internally and externally, strengthening and balancing the legs, and opening the spine in all directions (flexion, extension, rotation). The cooldown poses will soothe both the joints and the nervous system and prepare the body for *shavasana*.

Although this is a beginner-friendly sequence, even seasoned practitioners will benefit from having a simple standing pose program on hand for days when they need to center and ground themselves. For new practitioners, these standing poses can be challenging. They must be learned from a qualified teacher because alignment is an acquired, rather than an instinctive, skill. But once they have become familiar, it is helpful to practice standing poses frequently. In time, you will experience a growing sense of ease and comfort as well as the sense of mastery that comes from familiarity and repetition. Breathe and enjoy.

Start with downward dog and one or two gentle lunges to loosen up the joints. When you are warmed up, proceed with the standing poses. >>>



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There is nothing more important

the standing sequence



◀ Triangle (utthita trikonasana)

The pose rotates the pelvis over the thighbones, loosening the hip joints and releasing the hamstrings and adductor muscles.

Rather than pulling your pelvis backward, make sure that your sacrum moves into your body, toward your abdomen. Keeping the back leg straight and grounded, lengthen from the tailbone to the crown of the head while reaching the arms wide and turning your navel gently toward your top hand.



▲ Side angle (utthita parshvakonasana)

This posture is one of the most strengthening for the legs, and it helps bring balance and stability to the knee and ankle joints. The deep groin opening here feels better when the hip joints are already warm from triangle pose.

The back leg is strong and weighted, the spine centered. Make sure the front knee tracks directly over the heel and ankle.



▲ Basic standing forward bend (uttanasana)

After the upright standing poses, the hip joints and hamstrings are ready for a deeper forward bend, and the body is ready for a more restful pose. Bringing the head below the heart relaxes the brain and nervous system.

Uttanasana can teach "right effort" as you learn to balance between effort and surrender—ideally the legs stay strong and energized while the spine and arms relax fully.



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than learning to connect with the earth by grounding through the feet.



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◀ Tree pose (vrikshasana)

In this basic balance posture, the standing leg needs to ground strongly while the torso becomes light and the spine long.

Learn to relax your shoulders as you raise your arms overhead, reaching from the back of the rib cage rather than lifting the tops of the shoulders. Keep your face and sense organs soft, and balance from your inner core as you lift gently from the floor of your pelvis.



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Warrior I (virabhadrasana I) ▲

Here the back leg rotates internally and the psoas muscles are lengthened as the torso turns toward the front leg, giving more spinal extension and front-body opening.

Turn your back foot approximately 60 degrees toward the front foot to protect the back knee. It is important to keep the front knee aligned with the heel and ankle. The shoulders and face stay relaxed as the arms reach overhead, and the spine reaches up and out of the pelvis and grounded legs. Rotating the arms externally (so that the palms keep turning toward each other) will help keep space in the shoulders and upper back. >>>



No matter what your focus, your asana sequence should be balanced

counterposes & cooldowns



Downward dog ▲
(ahdo mukha svanasana)
 The hamstrings are already long and warm from the standing poses, so it will feel easier to ground the legs here. The spine lengthens from the crown of the head toward the tailbone. Bring the elements of standing poses into your dog pose, externally rotating the arms, gently engaging the abdominals, and energizing the legs and feet.



Comfortable cross-legged seated forward bend ▲
(ahdo mukha sukhasana)
 This simple forward bend is a nice counterpose for the spine; it also releases the outer hip rotators after they have worked hard to support the legs in standing poses.

Keeping your sit bones grounded, lengthen the front of your spine by reaching your arms as far out in front of you as you can. Once you've reached maximum length, let your whole torso relax, including your arms and your neck. The hips will release more easily if the forehead is resting on the floor (or a block).



Child's pose (balasana) ▲
 This soothes the spine and the nervous system and relaxes the brain. Bring your feet toward each other, and open your knees a bit wider than your hips as you drop the pelvis down and back. Relax, letting the pelvis sink down toward the legs and the forehead rest on the floor.
 (If your hips are tight, fold a blanket over the calves and behind the knees, and rest the forehead on a block or on your folded arms instead of the floor.)



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with warm-ups, “counter” or cooldown poses, and relaxation.



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◀ Reclining leg stretches (supta padangusthasana)

The reclining poses stretch the muscles of the legs and hips and, most important, they bring the sacroiliac joints back to a neutral, stable position.

For the best results, give equal energy and awareness to both legs, lengthening both the one on the floor and the one that is stretching upward into the strap. Keep your head and shoulders relaxed as they rest on the floor.



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▲ Reclining twist

This simple version is a delicious release for the spine and the muscles of the back. Lying on your back, bring both knees up toward your chest and then drop them to the right, keeping your arms open in a “T” position as you roll your lower body gently onto your right side. Keep gently reaching back to the left with your left arm to open the belly and torso, but let gravity do most of the work here, as you feel the legs and the left arm releasing away from each other. Repeat on the other side.



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Relaxation and integration ▲ (shavasana—5 minutes minimum)

Shavasana is a key part of any practice session and should always be included. Detailed instructions appear on page 98.

If your lower back is uncomfortable, keep your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, minimizing effort by allowing the knees to rest against one another. Another option is to place a bolster or a folded blanket under your knees.

Northern California writer and yoga teacher Sandy Blaine has been practicing yoga for 18 years, and is writing a book about home practice. She teaches asana classes in the Bay Area, where she is co-director of the Alameda Yoga Station (www.AlamedaYogaStation.com), and a faculty member of the Berkeley Yoga Room’s teacher-training program (www.YogaRoomBerkeley.com).