



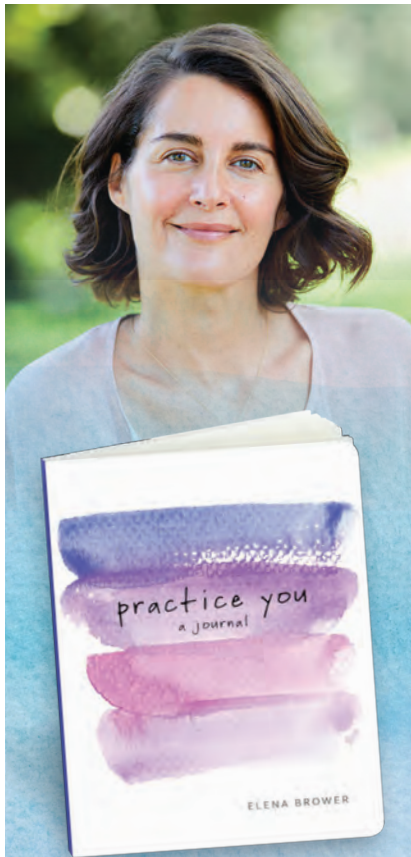
Meet your
next teacher

Natasha Rizopoulos

NATASHA RIZOPOULOS'S APPROACH TO YOGA

is as much philosophical as it is physical. A teacher at Down Under School of Yoga in Boston, Rizopoulos has spent decades creating and refining a system of yoga that helps students align their bodies so they can organize their lives—from working through relationships and navigating careers to feeling healthy and whole. “Asana is the tip of the iceberg,” says Rizopoulos. “The poses are vehicles to a deeper understanding of yourself.” She encourages students and teachers alike to learn the building blocks of a good practice, including smart sequencing—then apply them in creative ways. “A good yoga class allows you to have an asana experience that is more meaningful than you might have thought possible. The essence of good sequencing is the way in which each opens the world to you.”

Intrigued? In the pages ahead, you'll get to know Rizopoulos and experience her unique teaching method firsthand with a sequence for building to Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose). This challenging set of poses will set you up for a safe vinyasa practice and offer a glimpse into Rizopoulos's new online Yoga Journal Master Class on smart sequencing for arm balances, launching next month.



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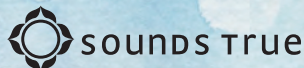
SHIVA REA

“A heartfelt offering.”

SHARON GANNON

“What a treasure.”

DANI SHAPIRO



My first teacher training was co-taught by Maty Ezraty, who was teaching Ashtanga Yoga, and Lisa Walford, who is from the Iyengar Yoga method. I was blessed to have these two very different traditions presented to me early on in my yoga studies in such beautiful ways. Sometimes the two styles can seem at odds with each other, yet these two extraordinary teachers shared a mutual respect and presented their perspectives in a way that never felt dogmatic. The conversations they had about their respective traditions were illuminating and inspiring. As teachers, they were never fundamentalists, rather they were inquisitive—asking questions like *What do you gain by doing something this way versus that way?*

This spirit of inquiry is the embodiment of yoga. And their exchanges about asana and yoga philosophy inform my studies and my teaching to this day.

My personal practice has morphed dramatically. For 10 years, I practiced Ashtanga daily. I loved the repetition of sequences that gradually

evolve over time; how things that initially seemed impossible, five years later were within reach. And I loved the linking of breath and movement—the emphasis on the classical vinyasa: Chaturanga, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog Pose), and Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose).

Over time, however, the practice created some wear and tear on my body. I found myself attending more and more Iyengar classes. I loved the sequencing, the use of props, the themes, and all the different ways the teachers modified asana for different students so that they weren't doing cookie-cutter versions of poses. Eventually, my home practice and my teaching became an amalgam of Ashtanga and Iyengar. I started theming my classes, using props, and designing

practices around specific peak poses. I call my system Align Your Flow. Over the years, I have experienced firsthand and witnessed in others how bringing order to your physical practice can have a profound effect on your mind. When you practice with alignment—when you are completely engaged by subtle intentions and actions—you become mentally aligned as well. Your consciousness becomes focused and you become fully present: You are not just in a vinyasa flow, you're also in a flow with yourself.

I knew I wanted to teach the first time I took a class that was truly taught. By that I mean, when someone teaches yoga rather than just telling you which poses to do, the asana become vehicles for know-

“Good sequencing allows students to leave class feeling balanced—energetically, physically, and mentally.”

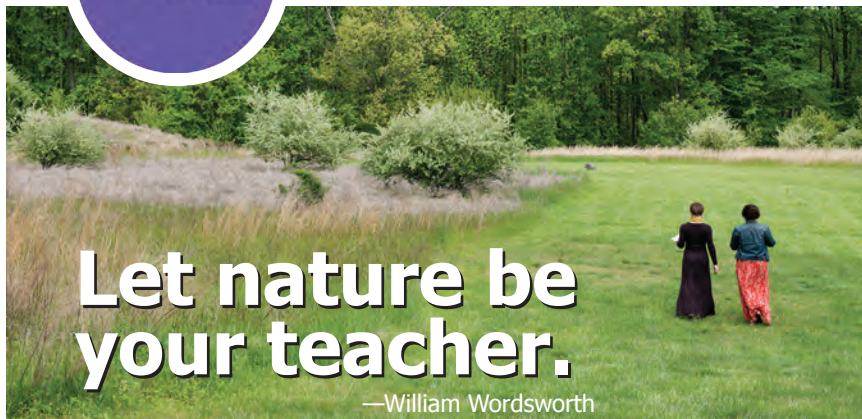
ing yourself better—your anatomy, how you interact with the world, and your mental and physical habits. It's ironic that the better you are taught a pose, and the deeper your relationship with it becomes, the less you ultimately care about the pose itself. Instead, you understand that the pose takes you on a journey and you're along for the ride no matter what. You're in a relationship with that pose, on good days and bad days. I believe that skillful teaching brings you to life. It makes you care about what matters, makes you interested in actions, not results. And that's very different from someone simply calling out a pose.

A well-sequenced class can also help students better understand the benefits of each pose. Good sequencing unlocks

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postures. For example, a hard pose that may otherwise seem elusive or inaccessible becomes doable because of where it lands in a sequence (what came before it); the pose comes into focus in a way that it may not have otherwise. Good sequencing allows students to leave class feeling balanced—energetically, physically, and mentally. In contrast, a poorly sequenced class feels physically confusing and energetically unbalanced: It can feel like the rest of your life when your life isn't going quite as you'd like.

Learning good sequencing will give you freedom to be creative based on sound principles of anatomy and alignment. If you're a teacher, you'll be able to change a sequence in the moment based on who is in the room or how your students are responding to your class. Once you understand how to organically build toward a peak pose, you can modify or tailor your class based on what your students need more or less of in order to make progress. One common mistake teachers make is to memorize a sequence and rigidly adhere to it without assessing how it is being received or processed. Another is building toward a peak and then saying "OK, time for Savasana (Corpse Pose)." Prepare your students to be quiet at the end of class in the same way you prepare them for a demanding pose. One of my most important jobs as a yoga teacher is to give students a good Savasana.



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Yoga Journal's new online Master Class program brings the wisdom of world-renowned teachers to your home-practice space, offering access to exclusive workshops with a different master teacher every six weeks. In December, Natasha Rizopoulos will share her sequencing method for success in arm balances. If you're ready to get a fresh perspective and maybe even meet a lifelong yoga mentor, sign up for YJ's yearlong membership at yogajournal.com/masterclass.



A smart start to vinyasa

Secure the foundation for a safe vinyasa practice with this thoughtful, challenging sequence from Natasha Rizopoulos.

GOOD SEQUENCING IS LIKE A GOOD BOOK: It has both narrative and energetic arcs. This means your sequence begins somewhere strategic, it proceeds progressively and methodically toward a peak pose, and then it cools down from that peak toward Savasana. Along the way there are groups (or chapters) of poses that work together logically to reveal the peak pose. Even within each chapter there is a mini peak of sorts—a challenge that the sequence has prepared you for.

I teach this storytelling method of sequencing by introducing what I call essential elements—movements that lengthen, strengthen, or bring awareness to a body part that needs attention in order for a peak pose to be fully realized. The goal is to introduce these essential elements early on in your sequence, under the simplest circumstances possible, so you can practice them without distraction, then continue to revisit them in gradually more demanding ways as the sequence continues.

In the following practice, we'll work on the essential element of drawing the heads of the upper arms back in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Then we'll apply this alignment in progressively more difficult poses—Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose), Chaturanga, and Upward-Facing Dog Pose—over time setting the foundation for more difficult arm balances, like Bakasana (Crane Pose) and Eka Pada Koundinyasana (One-Footed Pose Dedicated to the Sage Koundinya). As you practice, hold each pose for as long as needed in order to discover and imprint the actions and alignment that inform it—this may take between 5 and 20 breaths, depending on the difficulty of the pose. Practice a soft and steady Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath), noticing how the inhalations can create space and openness (especially in the chest) and how the exhalations tend to anchor and lift the lower belly. Observe how each of the poses builds on the pose that came before it.



1 TADASANA Mountain Pose

Stand with your big toes touching and your heels about an inch apart. Pull your inner arches up while pressing your big-toe mounds down. Engage your quadriceps without locking your knees. Press your femurs back while gently releasing your tailbone down. The right balance of these two actions will create a subtle lift in the pit of your abdomen and support the natural curve of your lower back. Draw the heads of your upper arms back so they align with the sides of your body. We will explore this Tadasana shoulder alignment throughout this sequence.



2 TADASANA WITH CHATURANGA DANDASANA ARMS Mountain Pose with Four-Limbed Staff Pose Arms

Maintaining the actions from Tadasana, bend your elbows to create right angles with your arms. If you allow your elbows to splay outward, the heads of your upper arms will collapse forward, closing the fronts of your shoulders. Instead, pin your elbows into your midline to help pull your upper arms backward. Keep your forearms parallel to the floor and draw your hands backward to extend your wrists—Chaturanga arms. Notice that you are still practicing Tadasana shoulders.



3 TADASANA WITH URDHVA MUKHA SVANASANA ARMS Mountain Pose with Upward-Facing Dog Pose Arms

Hold your Tadasana shoulders and wrist extension as you release your forearms to your sides. Your arms should form a straight line that is perpendicular to the floor. Continue to draw the heads of your upper arms backward. This is your Up Dog arm position; you are still maintaining Tadasana shoulders. In other words, Tadasana shoulders are also Up Dog and Chaturanga shoulders. Preserving the integrity of this alignment is key to maintaining healthy shoulders in a vinyasa practice.



4 BHUJANGASANA WITH CHATURANGA ARMS Cobra Pose with Four-Limbed Staff Pose Arms

Come to your belly with your legs extended and your feet hip-width apart. Place your hands beside your lower ribs with your wrists beneath your elbows. Roll the heads of your upper arms back and up until your shoulders are at elbow height. Pin your elbows into your midline, engage the muscles of your upper back, and press your hands into the floor to help you find this alignment. With your arms forming right angles, notice that the heads of your upper arms are in Tadasana position.



CHATURANGA WITH A STRAP HAMMOCK

To find safe shoulder alignment in Chaturanga, make a strap loop several inches wider than your shoulders. Put the strap above your elbows and come into Plank Pose, splaying your elbows to prevent the strap from falling. Practice Tadasana actions: root down with your big-toe mounds, lift the tops of your thighs, and release your tailbone down. Then, exhale to bend your arms, pulling your chest forward and pushing your heels back, moving into Chaturanga with the strap supporting your ribs. Your shoulders should be in line with your sides—Tadasana shoulders!



CHATURANGA WITH BLOCKS

Another way to find safe alignment and build strength in this pose is to use a pair of blocks. Place them upright and shoulder-width apart at the front of your mat. From Plank Pose, with your fingertips 1–2 inches from the blocks, revisit Tadasana actions: big-toe mounds, thighs, and tailbone. Come into Chaturanga by pulling your chest forward, pressing your heels back, bending your arms, and pinning in your elbows. Gently tap the blocks with the fronts of your shoulders. The heads of your upper arms are in line with the sides of your body—Tadasana shoulders.



CHATURANGA

Classical Chaturanga builds on the alignment and prop work you practiced in the previous postures. Begin in Plank Pose with your shoulders slightly ahead of your wrists. Plug into the floor with your big-toe mounds to activate your quadriceps, lift the tops of your thighs, and keep your tailbone heavy. Exhale into Chaturanga. Think more about pulling your chest forward than lowering. This will help keep the heads of your upper arms in line with the sides of your body, rather than collapsing toward the floor. Catch yourself at elbow height. Again, Tadasana shoulders!



URDHVA MUKHA SVANASANA

From Chaturanga, slide your big-toe mounds back on your mat, coming on to the tops of your feet as you pull your chest forward and up. Never let your shoulders dip lower than your elbows. The key action here is to move in opposite directions simultaneously as you transition—feet back and chest forward—so that your body is pulled taut and doesn't sink toward the floor. End with your shoulders above your wrists. Since Chaturanga and Up Dog share the same Tadasana shoulder alignment, this sequence will help make the movement between the two poses more fluid. ■