

paradise found

Find the balance of strength and flexibility that's right for you, and you'll blossom into Bird of Paradise.

Grace and equanimity are both the requisite components and the just rewards of learning to fly in the aptly named Bird of Paradise. In this gorgeous flower of a pose, the challenge is to balance the rooted strength of your standing leg with a blossoming openness in your torso and extended leg. Learning to do that requires the dual qualities of *sthira* (steadiness) and *sukha* (ease).

Patanjali explains in Yoga Sutra II.48 that once the **balance between opposites** is achieved, "thereafter one is undisturbed by the dualities." This is potent stuff, whether applied on the mat or off, suggesting that when you allow opposites to coexist, rather than let one or the other end of the spectrum dominate, the ultimate reward is the composure and equanimity that bring so many people to yoga in the first place.

Throughout this practice, you'll explore a series of primary actions that will help you cultivate a balance of strength and openness, stability and >





1 Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose), variation

Begin to explore the theme of opposing actions, creating mobility balanced by stability. As you extend out to the left, emphasize the external rotation of your left leg and the length of your left waist while simultaneously energizing your right leg. Notice how these seemingly contrary impulses allow you to find more range of motion in your front hip. Similarly, observe how releasing your front ribs toward your back body as you pull your right shoulder back directs the opening into your right shoulder.

(benefits)

- Strengthens the external rotators of the hips
- Lengthens the adductors and hip flexors
- Improves mobility in the hips
- Opens the shoulders
- Develops balance and focus

(contraindications)

- Shoulder injury
- Hamstring or adductor injury



2 Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose), variation

Continue your investigation of actions rooted in both stability and mobility. Ideally, the leverage of the bind will provide the stability that can deepen your opening in the torso. Notice, however, whether forcing the bind is inhibiting your ability to find movement in your left hip and length in your spine. If, for instance, it has become harder to firm your left buttock under you and extend your sternum away from your navel, use a strap to help you bind instead. Observe how different the experience is when *sthira* and *sukha* coexist and when one overpowers the other.



3 Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose)

Balancing two actions that seem to contradict each other has a very palpable benefit. When you temper the movement in your left hip by vigorously straightening and rooting your standing leg, you can balance more easily. Hone your awareness so that you notice the impulse to move with stability or mobility dominating, and then make the transition to a middle place of equilibrium, both literally and energetically.



4 Bhujapidasana (Shoulder-Pressing Pose)

In this arm balance, the benefits of finding a happy equilibrium between opposite ends of the spectrum are vividly apparent. You need mobility in the hips to get into this pose, but you can stay there only by using the strength of your arms and legs. Notice which side of the equation is easy for you: being strong or being flexible. Instead of going directly to what is more familiar to you, insist on cultivating its opposite and observe how poised and steady you feel when you do.



5 Bird of Paradise

And now it's time to put it all together. Balance your desire to extend your left leg with the imperative of keeping your right leg straight and strong. Indulging one or the other extreme can limit your experience, both on the mat and off. See if you can instead commit to exploring both ends of the spectrum and find comfort in the balance you create. The seeds of this effort will serve you far beyond your flowering Bird.

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➤ mobility, and perhaps most important, challenge and comfort. Whether you see yourself as someone who has more strength than flexibility, or the other way around, you'll benefit when you explore actions that do not come naturally to you and when you avoid acting on what comes easiest to you.

If you arrive on the mat with an excess of either strength or flexibility, and consistently work from that place of familiarity, take this opportunity to explore and engage with its opposite. Off the mat, perhaps you can also grow by expanding your definition of yourself to encompass a broader range of possibility.

In the process you may experience your practice in a way that was unavailable to you before. As you practice, see if you can be more interested in the interplay of dual actions than in the final pose. When the time is right, you'll find yourself pleasantly surprised as you take the shape of a grounded yet soaring bird.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Practice three to five cycles of Surya Namaskar A (Sun Salutation A), followed by 10 to 12 breaths in Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II). Then do three to five rounds of Surya Namaskar B, followed by Prasarita Padottanasana C (Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend), practiced twice, interlacing your fingers first with your right, and then your left, index finger closest to your thumbs. Combined, these poses will warm up your legs, hips, and torso for what comes next.

UTTHITA TRIKONASANA

(*Extended Triangle Pose*), variation



Facing the long side of the mat with your arms extended, step your feet as wide apart as your wrists. Externally rotate your left leg so that your left foot is parallel to the long side of the mat, with your left heel in line with your right inner arch. Pivot your right heel back slightly so your foot is at a 60-degree angle. Lift your kneecaps and align your left knee with the second toe of

your left foot, remaining rooted through the ball of your left big toe as you do this.

Inhale, lengthen your spine, and spread across your collarbones. Exhale, shift your pelvis to the right, and reach to the left with your left hand, creating length along the left side of your body. Release your left hand to the floor or a block behind your left shin (your left arm should be perpendicular to the floor). Stack your right hand directly above your left and take your gaze to your right thumb. This point in space will remain your *drishti*, or gazing point. Release your right arm behind your back and take hold of your left thigh or waist. Use this grip as leverage to gently draw your right shoulder back, opening the right side of your chest.

Now the dance between mobility and stability begins. To emphasize both the external rotation of your left thigh in its hip socket and the length of your left waist, pin your left buttock into the midline and direct your left sitting bone toward your right heel. Simultaneously extend your sternum away from your navel. Observe how practicing these space-creating actions on the left side can make your right thigh and groin bulge forward, causing you to lose stability in your back leg. Instead, press your right femur straight back, so that you balance the opening on your left side with steadiness on your right. The combination of these actions will allow you to explore the movement in your left hip without compromising the stability of your foundation. Spin your left ribs forward as you rotate your right ribs back. Direct your front ribs back by moving them toward your frontal hipbones. Hold for 10 to 12 breaths. Use an inhalation to come up, and then repeat on the other side.

UTTHITA PARSVAKONASANA

(*Extended Side Angle Pose*), variation



Begin the pose with the same position and foot alignment that you had in Trikonasana. Inhale and create space in your torso, and on an exhalation bend your left knee to a

90-degree angle, left thigh parallel to the floor, with the knee over the ankle and in line with the second toe. Take another inhalation to lengthen your spine and waist. As you exhale, extend to the left and place your left hand on the floor or on a block on the inside of your left ankle, reaching your right hand to the ceiling and looking toward your right thumb.

Use an inhalation to broaden across your collarbones, keeping your front ribs soft as you do this. As you exhale, take your right hand behind your back and hook onto your left waist or thigh. Move your left buttock forward and under you, and direct your left sitting bone toward your right heel as you strongly press your right femur back. Firming your left buttock under creates mobility in your left hip, but if you allow your right thigh to lose stability and go along for the ride by shifting forward in space, the rotation in your left hip is diminished. By creating balance between these two opposing actions, you'll have the opportunity to experience a fuller expression of the pose.

Continue integrating these opposing actions, and now use the leverage of your right arm to roll your right shoulder and ribs open. If you can maintain the existing alignment in your foundation, take your left hand under your left thigh and clasp your right wrist behind your back. The wrap will give you greater leverage in lengthening the spine and opening your chest, but this increased mobility should not come at the expense of your foundation. Remember that the goal is to balance strength and flexibility without compromising one for the other.

If the wrap causes your left buttock to stick out behind you, your right ribs to roll forward, or your left waist to shorten, you have sacrificed the fundamentals without gaining anything significant. Instead, consider using a strap between your hands to create spaciousness in the torso without losing the stability of the base. Notice how different the pose feels when you occupy both ends of the spectrum instead of letting one overpower the other. Hold for 10 to 12 breaths. Use an inhalation to come up, and then repeat on the other side. *continued on page 104*

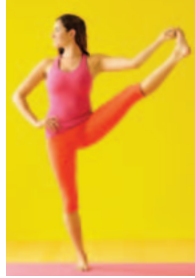
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UTTHITA HASTA

PADANGUSTHASANA

(Extended Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose)



Come to standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) and activate your legs, engaging your quadriceps and gently pressing the tops of your thighs back so that your groins are soft and hollow. Release your tailbone and pubis toward the floor, and extend your sternum away from your navel, making the four sides of your torso equally long. You'll want to maintain these fundamental elements as you continue.

Place your right hand on your hip, and hold your left big toe with the first two fingers of your left hand. If your hamstrings are tight, you can use a strap with a small loop around your foot. Pause with your left knee bent and pointing slightly to the left, and your left heel in line with your pubis. When you lifted your left leg, did your left hip come up higher than your right? Did the muscles in your right leg go a bit slack? Revisit the actions from the previous postures so you can reclaim the essence of your Tadasana: Direct your left sitting bone toward your right heel and vigorously press your right thigh back as you drop your pubis and tailbone equally toward the floor.

With your next inhalation extend your left leg out in front of you, opening it to the left on an exhalation. Immediately recommit to exploring mobility in conjunction with stability. Draw your left sitting bone toward your right heel to emphasize the external rotation in your left leg and the length of your left waist, but notice if this makes your standing leg and groin puff forward and your chest collapse. Instead, press your right femur back and lift your sternum away from your navel to re-create a Tadasana leg and torso in concert with opening your left hip. As you continue these actions, turn your head to the right and look over your right shoulder, bringing your attention to the internal experience of the posture.

Negotiating the relationship between strength and flexibility will help you to balance in the pose, giving you a strong and stable foundation from which to experience ease without vacillation. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths. Use an inhalation to bring your left leg back to center, and on an exhalation release to Tadasana. Repeat on the other side.

BHUJAPIDASANA

(Shoulder-Pressing Pose)



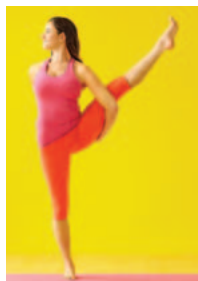
From Tadasana, fold forward into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) with your heels just wider than hip-distance apart and your toes turned slightly out. With your knees slightly bent, take your left hand behind your left calf and use your hand as leverage to ease your left shoulder behind your left knee. Then rest your left fingertips on the floor behind your left heel and take your right shoulder behind your right knee, with the right hand behind your right heel, so that you end up with your knees hugging your shoulders. The name of this asana, “Shoulder-Pressing Pose” in English, is not coincidental! As soon as you have established the initial position, begin to firmly hug your shoulders with your knees so that your legs stay high on your upper arms. If placing both shoulders behind your knees causes any strain in the lower back, continue to practice the first three poses in the sequence until you gain more flexibility in your hips and can explore this pose without experiencing discomfort.

Move your elbows in to shoulder distance, creating a slanted shelf with your upper arms. Extend your sternum away from your navel, and root down with your fingertips, shifting your weight forward. These actions are crucial to prevent yourself from falling backward as you sit on your triceps. Keep squeezing your shoulders, reaching your chest forward and gripping the floor with your fingertips as you lightly release your upper thighs onto your upper arms. Maintain height in your hips and move the energy of the pose forward. Start to walk your feet toward each

other until you can lift them off the floor and hook your left ankle over your right.

The first three poses in the sequence created the mobility in the hips that allows you to get your legs high on your shoulders in this posture. Now find the stability that you cultivated in the back, or standing, leg of those earlier poses by gripping your shoulders with your inner thighs and pressing down firmly through each hand. It is the integration of actions influenced by opposites—strength and flexibility—that gives the pose integrity. You can't just rely on flexibility to get your shoulders behind your knees, and simply employing brute force to carry your body weight with your arms won't work either. Instead, explore both and find the gracefulness of equanimity in a potentially precarious situation. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths and then release your feet to the floor. Fold forward in Uttanasana, holding opposite elbows. Repeat once more, and then again rest in Uttanasana.

BIRD OF PARADISE



From Uttanasana, begin with the same action you took to enter Bhujapidasana: While holding your left calf with your left hand, slide the left shoulder behind your

left knee. Keeping your shoulder in this position, wrap your left hand behind your back with your palm facing the ceiling. Now take your right hand behind your back and clasp your right wrist with your left hand. If you can't reach to bind, use a strap to connect. If taking your knee behind your shoulder or establishing a bind creates pain in your lower back or left shoulder, your body is not ready to do the pose without risking injury. Instead, practice the first four poses in this sequence regularly in order to develop the mobility in your shoulders and hips for this last pose, and then revisit it down the road a bit.

If you've established the bind with your hands or the strap, shift your weight into your right foot and pause, with your left

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foot lightly touching the floor. Direct your drishti to the floor a foot or so ahead of you to help you balance as you prepare to lift into the pose. With your next inhalation, start to slowly extend your right leg straight as you lift your torso into an upright position. Move fluidly and with control, and make sure that you are straightening your right leg and lifting your torso simultaneously. Keep your left knee bent as you pull yourself up.

Once you are standing, focus on a familiar group of actions to create stability in your standing leg and mobility in your left hip. Direct your left sitting bone toward your right heel and firm the left buttock under you; these actions will emphasize the rotation in the left hip socket while lengthening your left waist so that your torso is even on both sides. Consider the effect of these actions on your right leg. The opening in your left hip will be more distinct if it is balanced by strength and stability in your right leg. Push your right femur back so that the leg is straight and the groin is hollow. Then,

reach your sternum away from your navel and drop your pubis and tailbone down toward the floor as you did in Tadasana.

Use this stability to explore extending your left leg with ease. Be more interested in maintaining the integrity of your standing leg and the rotation in the left hip than in straightening your left leg. If you force the extension at the expense of your foundation, you've sacrificed stability in the quest for mobility. See if you can instead negotiate a balance between the opposite actions of strength and flexibility. Straighten your left leg until you notice yourself starting to lose the series of actions in your left hip and right leg that you've explored throughout the sequence. At that point, pause.

From this balanced place, press through your left heel and direct your drishti past your right shoulder. Linger in a space that uses both strength and flexibility, and see what happens when you refuse to sacrifice one for the other. Hold for several breaths, and then bend your left knee and slowly lower your torso and left foot to

the floor, releasing back into Uttanasana. Rest here for a moment and then take the second side.

When you finish this sequence, release your hips and shoulders with Garudasana (Eagle Pose) and Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose). Practice Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose), Dolphin or Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand), Halasana (Plow Pose), Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand), and Halasana again. End with a supine twist and a long Savasana.

As you play with the sequence over time and explore opposite actions, notice that such exploration is even more compelling as a life practice. Prioritize the interplay of contrary impulses and actions, and discover how liberating it can be for them to coexist. In Bird of Paradise, as in life, the sum is greater than its parts. ❖

Natasha Rizopoulos teaches around the world and is featured in Yoga Journal's Step-by-Step Home Practice System DVD series. For more information, visit natasharizopoulos.com.