

## basics

### adho mukha svanasana

by Natasha Rizopoulos

# Teacher's Pet

**ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA** (Downward-Facing Dog) was the first asana I fell in love with, and it remains my desert island pose. Down Dog offers many benefits. When you're tired, staying in this pose for a spell will restore your energy. It can also help strengthen and shape your legs, ease shoulder stiffness, and slow your heartbeat. I find it the perfect microcosm of yoga practice: It requires both strength and flexibility; it teaches you to appreciate alignment, and thus prepares you for doing inversions, backbends, and forward bends; and it offers philosophical lessons, such as the cultivation of stability and spaciousness, that will carry over into the rest of your life.

**Master this favorite pose and feel all that yoga has to offer.**

#### TRAINING GROUND

Most of us come to the yoga mat with a predisposition toward either bendiness or stiffness. Whichever end of the spectrum you swing toward, you can begin to balance your body by practicing Down Dog. If you're stiff, the pose will feel challenging because of tightness in the shoulders and hamstrings. If you're flexible, you're likely





Lift sitting bones

Press  
quadriceps  
toward  
hamstrings

Reach through  
your heels



**DON'T** Overarch your lower back.



**DO** Align your ears with  
your upper arms.



to collapse in your lower back and shoulders. Unfortunately, bendy types might not feel the effects of the collapse until years later, when they begin to sustain injuries in their lumbar disks or rotator cuff muscles. But whether you are stiff or bendy, a wonderful modification that I call Puppy Dog can teach you the actions and alignment that allow you to experience a Down Dog that feels spacious and open but is also stable and strong.

#### PUPPY DOG

To begin, stand facing a wall. Place both of your hands on the wall at about the height of your frontal hipbones. Your hands should be shoulder-distance apart, with the creases of your wrists forming a horizontal line and your index fingers pointing straight up. Keeping this alignment in your hands, step back so that your arms and torso are parallel to the floor, feet are hip-distance apart and parallel, and hips are stacked over your feet.

Firmly connect to the wall with the whole of each hand and use the energy from this contact to help you elongate your spine as you press your hips away from the wall (see figure 1). Creating this length is one of the central goals in Down Dog, but tightness in the shoulders can interfere with your ability to find this



Figure 2 (version of Downward-Facing Dog) is described on page 58.

extension. Because the hands and arms in Puppy Dog are not weight bearing (but are in Down Dog), the effect of tight shoulders is mitigated, allowing you to extend out of your shoulders and move most of your weight back into your legs.

As you breathe here and continue to lengthen your spine, notice if you've created congestion around your neck, which can happen by narrowing across your upper back or by sinking your front ribs toward the floor. Pay attention to the position of your head in relation to your upper arms: If you are more flexible, you

will have a tendency to sink through your armpits, poke the front ribs toward the floor, and overarch the spine. But remember that over time this can injure the shoulders and lower back.

If your ears are lower than your upper arms, lift your head slightly, soften your front ribs, and rotate your shoulders away from your ears as you firm your triceps (outer arms). This external rotation should help bring your ears back in line with your biceps. As you align your shoulders, you are establishing the quality of *sthira* (strength or steadiness). You can

## Pose Benefits

Opens and strengthens the shoulders and upper body

Stretches the hamstrings and calves

Tones the legs

## Contraindications

High or low blood pressure

Acid reflux

Hiatal hernia

History of stroke

Serious shoulder injury

then use this *sthira* to create *sukha* (ease or spaciousness). A posture needs both attributes to have integrity and balance. Maintaining these stabilizing actions, press your hips away from the wall to create length through your spine, and then spread your shoulder blades away from your spine to create breadth across your upper back. Emphasize the spaciousness in your torso by engaging your quadriceps and pressing the tops of your thighs back, creating even more space in your lower back and waist area.

### BLOCK PARTY

To set up for the next variation, place a pair of blocks flat and lengthwise toward the front of your mat, and arrange them so that they are shoulder-distance apart and parallel. Come to all fours, with your hands on the blocks and your hips stacked above your knees. Adjust the blocks so that your hands are an inch or so in front of your shoulders, with the fleshy part of your palm just over the edge for traction (as opposed to having your hands on the center of the blocks). This is the most stable position for your hands and is a way to make sure that the creases of your wrists form a straight line rather than tilting in diagonally—a common misalignment that hampers shoulder opening. Once you've organized your hands, set your feet hip-distance apart, lift your hips, and straighten your legs (see figure 2).

Remember the actions and alignment from Puppy Dog. Extend your front and back body equally and emphasize the external rotation in the shoulders so that you don't collapse your armpits or create tension in your upper back. With your hands elevated on the blocks, you will be able to extend out of your shoulders more actively, transferring some of the weight of the pose from your arms to your legs. As you do this, engage your quadriceps and press them back, reaching your heels toward the floor. In *Light on Yoga*, B. K. S. Iyengar writes that Adho Mukha Svanasana promotes shapely legs, but that will happen only if the legs become an integral part of the posture. If your hamstrings are tight, straightening your legs will be challenging, but notice how the blocks

### different dogs

In the Yoga Sutra, the sage Patanjali writes, "*Sthira sukham asanam*," or "the posture should be steady and easy." Our asanas should be equally alert and relaxed. Downward-Facing Dog Pose balances opposites and can be practiced myriad ways. Various yoga traditions approach the posture differently. Here's a look at a few different dogs.

**ANUSARA** This approach emphasizes the connection between the physical practice and the spiritual heart. Specific instructions often focus on lifting the undersides of the arms to allow a deeper connection of the shoulder blades into the back of the heart, then softening the heart and extending energy back out through the entire body.

**ASHTANGA** This tradition uses a short stance and spends five breaths in the pose, which makes sense for the heat-building flow that is central to this method. The gazing point is the navel. Students engage the *bandhas* and "jump" or "float" from Downward-Facing Dog to Dandasana in the Ashtanga primary series.

**BIKRAM** The 26-pose Bikram sequence does not include Downward-Facing Dog.

**IYENGAR** Down Dog is considered a neutralizing pose that is held for a long period of time (up to five minutes or more!) to establish alignment principles, generate heat, and build strength. This pose is a great preparation for the inversions that are a big part of this tradition.

**KUNDALINI** (as taught by Yogi Bhajan) In certain Kundalini sequence sets, or *kriyas*, the pose is practiced, but it is called Triangle. And the pose you might know as Trikonasana is not practiced in the Kundalini tradition.

help you to move in this direction. If your lower back rounds, bend your knees a little bit. As you energize your legs, imagine someone standing behind you with their hands at the tops of your thighs and pulling back so that your pelvis is drawn further away from your waist.

### FULL DOG

To come into the classical pose, begin in Balasana (Child's Pose) with your arms extended in front of you. Have your hands shoulder-distance apart, creases of the wrists parallel to the front edge of the mat. You can turn your hands out slightly to help you extend out of your shoulders. As you press down with your hands, try to lift your forearms away from the ground; this is an important intention and will stabilize your shoulders once you move into the full pose.

Next, incorporate the actions that you learned in the earlier variations: Exter-

nally rotate your shoulders, then firm your outer upper-arm muscles in toward the bone. On an inhalation, draw yourself up to your hands and knees, feet hip-distance apart. On an exhalation, press your hips back and up. Glance at your feet to make sure they are parallel, then let your head hang, observing the relationship of your head to your upper arms. If your ears are below your biceps, recommit to the actions from Puppy Dog. Work to create *sthira* so that all of your limbs can work together to obtain length along the spine. As you find the alignment of this pose, see if you can find alertness and relaxation in the rest of your life. Too often in our daily lives these two qualities exist in opposition. On the yoga mat, however, we can learn to inhabit them simultaneously. ■

### Online Extra

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