

MOUNTAIN POSTURE

Tadasana

By Richard Rosen

INTRODUCTION

Gheranda, author of one of Hatha Yoga's classic instructional manuals, "Gheranda's Collection" (*Gheranda-Samhita*), estimates that there are 8,400,000 yoga postures or asanas, one for every living creature in the world. If you're new to yoga and just beginning to learn a few postures, don't panic! Gheranda is simply saying that asanas are modeled on the myriad movements of nature, whether made by humans, animals, plants, or stars, and that the world we live in is itself the supreme asana, joyfully performed by its divine creator through the great family of her children. Anyway, of these 8,400,000 postures, Gheranda assures us that only 84 are truly accessible to humans, and of these, he singles out 32 that are most useful.

New students to yoga often learn asanas haphazardly, a twist here and a back bend there. But when I was a beginning student 20 years ago, I was taught that the two dozen or so standing postures should be acquired before all the others. Much has changed in the teaching of asanas since then, but among many teachers today, the conviction remains firm that this group of postures is the cornerstone of asana practice.

Two reasons are usually given for this. One, the standing postures strengthen our legs and ankles, open our groins, and improve our balance and sense of contact with the earth. This prepares our body-mind "from the ground up" to withstand and understand the ever-escalating challenges of asana in particular and yoga in general. And two, the standing postures together constitute a kind of preliminary course, a compendium of the many twists and bends and balancing acts common to all the asanas.

The foundation of the standing postures, in turn, is Mountain Posture (*tadasana*). The Hindu universe is traditionally portrayed as a series of concentric "islands" that revolve about the sacred mountain Meru. This cosmic axis, the bridge between heaven and earth, is often identified with the human spine, which the yogis call the *meru-danda*, the "staff of Meru." The "universe" of the asanas, with the standing postures as the innermost ring, appropriately revolve about the axis of *tadasana*. You may be surprised that the entire corpus of the asanas stands on this seemingly simple vertical position. But yoga teachers and other somatic explorers have long recognized that, as Mabel Todd (author of *The Thinking Body*) writes, the first requisite "in learning to perfect our carriage for all activities is to understand and to secure a well-integrated position while standing." Standing in yoga, of course, has both physical and spiritual implications. "Stand erect," says B.K.S. Iyengar, "or you cave in the very Self."

Tadasana is, figuratively and literally, the "jumping off" point as well as the terminus for each of the standing postures. What we learn as we climb this mountain is directly applied to all of its companions. In fact, you could say that all the standing postures are nothing more than variations of *tadasana*.

It's unfortunate that we usually think of the postures as relatively static physical positions, a perception perhaps encouraged by connotations of the word "posture" itself. But Moshe Feldenkrais insists that posture is a "dynamic term" related to the

way our body-mind is motivated, directed, and organized while we go about our daily business. It's much better to imagine yoga postures as co-ordinated, sequential "streams" of movements, each with a beginning, middle and end, more like a movie than a still photo. We tend to isolate the middle phase, which is really just one aspect or "frame" of the entire process, virtually ignoring what comes before and after.

Standing postures then begin in *tadasana*, where we do two things: establish the fundamental awareness of what the yogis would call our "steady and comfortable" uprightness, that provides a constant background to all our subsequent movements, and imaginatively rehearse the chain of events to come. Next we effortlessly adapt or "fit" ourselves into the energetic currents of the asana "stream" and shift into the middle phase of the movement. Much of our success here— whether we actually "fit in" or become fitful or discomfited—depends on our willingness to *consciously* immerse ourselves in the transition, to stay alert, receptive and enthusiastic during the passage, and not hurry ahead to what we imagine to be the destination. Finally, after exploring the ins and outs of the standing posture, we return to our home base, *tadasana*.

PRACTICE

For this practice you'll need a wall (free of pictures and other hanging ornaments) or the inside surface of a door frame, and bare feet. Be sure to breathe easily throughout, as you should in all the asanas, always through your nose.

Set your heels about 3-6 cms from the wall and lean your buttocks and shoulder blades (scapulas) (but not the back of your head) against it. Position your feet at hip width (about 10-12 cms apart), with your inner feet slightly "pigeon-toed" or turned in, so that the second toes (next to the big toes) are parallel to each other.

The feet connect us to the earth. But many of us in the modern world are hardly aware of our feet, so accustomed are we to binding them in shoes and walking on hard, flat surfaces like floors and sidewalks. Lift and spread the balls of your feet and "twinkle" the toes, then press the four "corners" of each foot—the bases of the big and little toes and the inner and outer heels—evenly and deeply into the floor. Roll the inner ankle bones outward and the outer ankle bones inward, so the fronts of the ankles narrow. At the same time broaden the backs of the heels and lengthen the outer feet from the heels to the little toes. Finally lift both inner ankle bones (without lifting the bases of the big toes) and imagine that you're pulling energy up along your inner legs, past the knees, all the way to the inner groins.

Many people tend to "lock" the knees in *tadasana* and so hyperextend these joints. While the knees should be as straight as possible in this and most (but not all) of the other standing postures, hyperextension isn't a healthy action and should always be avoided. Try this. Bend your knees slightly and slide a little down the wall. Purposely straighten your knees by pushing directly back on the knee caps (patellas). Repeat a few times. How does that feel? I'll bet it doesn't feel very good. Now bend your knees again, but this time when you straighten your knees, don't think about them, or even touch them, at all. Instead, imagine someone's pushing firmly on the backs of your calves and thighs. Then strongly contract the muscles on the front thighs (quadriceps) and, as you push back against the resistance on your legs, drive your heels deep into the floor. Try that a few times. How do you feel now? Better I hope, lighter and at the same time more grounded. Look at your knees and pretend they're a pair of eyes. Hyperextended knees go "cross-eyed" and turn in toward each other,

while the eyes of properly extended knees look straight ahead. Practice this exercise until you can straighten your knees without locking them, then apply what you've learned to all your postures.

Now rest your hands on the top rim of your pelvis, thumbs toward the back and fingertips pointing forward, touching just to the sides of those little bony knobs to either side of your navel. With your thumbs spread the back of your pelvis wide, and with your fingertips squeeze the front of your pelvis toward the navel. These two complementary actions—broadening the back and narrowing the front—are essential energy currents of the human pelvis. Learn them well, because they're applied across the board in every asana you'll ever practice.

Bend your knees again and slide down the wall. Lean heavily against the wall and imagine that your sacrum (which is both the back of your pelvis and base of your spine) is being pressed firmly into your pelvis. Be sure, as you practice this action, that your lower belly, just in front of the bone, is soft and receptive. Then slowly straighten your knees and feel the wall "scrub" down on the sacrum, dragging it toward your vestigial tail bone (coccyx). Your lower (lumbar) spine will lengthen, but maintain its inward curve and make sure it doesn't flatten against the wall. Pretend your tail is growing toward the floor, like a long monkey tail. Repeat this exercise a few times.

Bend your knees for a third time, and again lean heavily against the wall. Now feel your scapulas (to either side of the upper spine) pressed firmly into your upper back. As you do this, watch the *top* of the breast bone (sternum), just below the hollow at the base of your throat, lift lightly up. Be careful not to squeeze the scapulas together—like the back of the pelvis they should broaden—and don't "help" their forward movement by thrusting your lower front ribs sharply forward. Think instead of lengthening the *bottom* of the sternum down toward the navel. Press your palms against the wall (with your arms fully extended) to accentuate the inward action of the scapulas.

Now slowly straighten your knees again. As it did with the sacrum, the wall scrubs down on the scapulas and "feeds" them into your sacrum and long monkey tail. Repeat a few times, imagining the back of your torso from the scapulas through the tail rooting down deep into the earth. This is another essential current, expressing our innate urge to self-manifestation and relationship with our planet, that should carefully cultivated and refined in all the asanas.

Without lifting your scapulas, touch your thumbs on the "crook" of your neck (where the front of the throat joins the underside of your chin) to either side of the Adam's apple (larynx), just under the angle of the jaw. *Gently* press the thumbs up and into your head, as if you were trying to penetrate them to a spot at the "center" of your head, at the intersection of two lines, one drawn between your ear holes, the other between the bridge of your nose and that little bump on the back base of your skull. Watch how the actions of the scapulas, sternum, and crook of the neck contribute to the lift of your head, bringing it into alignment on the top of your spine, so it seems to float like a balloon above the rest of your body. Hold your thumbs in place for a minute or so, then release your arms to your sides.

Now stand quietly for a few minutes, with soft breath and eyes. Do you feel mountain-like? Firmly planted on the earth, yet powerful and majestic, your summit soaring toward the ceiling above? When you're ready, take a step forward and try

tadasana without the wall's support.

You've now laid the foundation for your work in the standing postures, a few of which we'll look at in upcoming columns. There's one essential energy current—in fact, the most essential current of them all—that we didn't get to this time. We'll fill in this blank in the next time.