

# UTTHITA TRIKONASANA

## Extended Triangle Pose

*By Richard Rosen*

### INTRODUCTION

When we hear the word “anchor,” most of us probably think of some kind of heavy object attached to a boat by a rope or cable that’s tossed overboard to keep the boat in one place. But by extension, an anchor can also be (to quote my dictionary) any “source of security or stability.” Each of our yoga asanas, as B.K.S. Iyengar tells us, has an anchor, its “source of security or stability,” which fixes the particular position—and us—to the Earth. You may remember that stability or steadiness (*sthira*) and its close companion, comfort (*sukha*), are the two classical criteria of a successfully performed posture. When these two qualities are established in a posture, our breath becomes effortless and we are drawn naturally into a state of meditation.

Now of course we don’t lug a heavy weight around with us during asana practice and dump it on the floor every time we assume a different position. Each asana actually has a built-in anchor, usually the place on our body that’s closest to or touching the floor. For the twenty-odd standing asanas, then, we can think of our heel (or heels, depending on the posture) as our anchor to the Earth. Though both heels are on the floor in the “two-sided” asanas, like Extended Side Angle (*utthita-parshvakonasana*) and Extended Triangle (*utthita-trikonasana*)—the asana which will concern us this time—it’s the back heel, the heel on the leg we’re moving away from, that serves as our primary anchor. To get ready to anchor yourself in Triangle, and in fact all the standing asanas, try the “Anchor” exercise.

### BENEFITS

Extended Triangle stretches and strengthens the ankles and legs, opens the groins and chest, elongates the spine, and strengthens the neck.

### “ANCHOR” EXERCISE

Stand with the balls of your feet on a lift, either a thin book or a sand bag. Make sure they are hip width and parallel to each other, and the heels firmly on the floor. The higher you raise the balls the more challenging the stretch will be for the backs of your legs. If you’re just starting the practice of asana, it might be better for you to take a low lift, or none at all, and support your hands on a yoga block or sturdy chair.

Exhale and bend into standing forward bend (*uttanasana*). With the lift under your feet, I suspect you will feel an interesting stretch on the backs of your legs. If it’s too intense, or if you feel a strain in your lower back, lower your lift or raise your torso.

Now bend your right knee completely to bring the heel near the buttock. Then bend your left knee slightly and swing the right knee around behind and press it strongly against the left thigh. Sink the ball-shaped head of your left thigh bone back into the cup-shaped hip socket, so the crease between the front thigh and belly is sharp. Exhale and slowly begin to straighten the left knee by driving down from the head of the thigh bone into the heel. Imagine that your heel is burrowing down into the center of the planet, and feel the planet shoving back against your heel. As you do this resist the right knee against the left thigh, so that you straighten the knee but refuse to let it “lock” back. Do this three or four times to anchor yourself in the Earth, then lower the right foot onto the lift and repeat with the other heel.

## **BEGINNING PRACTICE**

For the beginning practice you will need your Yoga wall and Yoga block (about 20-25 cm. high) or any other firm support. If your hamstrings and groins are tight, use a sturdy chair. If you are working on a carpet, lay one end of your sticky mat against the wall with the long axis of the mat perpendicular to the wall.

Stand with your left side to the wall. Press your left heel to the wall and angle the little toe slightly away from the wall (about 15E). Step your right foot forward until the distance between your feet is approximately equal to the length of one of your legs, so that your legs and the space between your feet form an equilateral triangle. This stance can be lengthened or shortened if necessary—experiment with different distances between your feet until you find one that’s steady and comfortable for you.

Turn your right foot out 90E (so that the line of the middle toe is perpendicular to the wall). See that a line drawn from the back of your right heel cuts through the middle of your inner left heel. Set your block or chair outside your right foot.

Rotate both thighs outwardly. Pay particular attention to the center of your right knee cap, which should be in line with the center of your right ankle (a point on the front ankle midway between the two ankle bones). Since this rotation of the right leg tends to shift your weight onto the outside edge of the foot, press the inner heel and the base of the big toe firmly against the floor. Contract your thigh muscles so that both knee caps lift toward their respective hip joints.

Be sure NOT to “flatten” your hips by pushing the left hip back in line with the right, which tends to distort the front knee. Instead roll the left hip slightly forward of the right, far enough to easily maintain the alignment of the right knee and ankle. Then rotate your rib case back to the left, twisting around your belly button. A line drawn through your shoulders should be perpendicular to the wall. Look straight ahead.

Before you tip your torso to the right, do a modified anchor exercise with your left leg. Bend your left knee slightly and re-create the feeling of resistance on the back of the thigh (provided in the exercise by the opposite bent knee). Lengthen your tail bone toward the floor and draw it into the pelvis, toward the pubis. Exhale and press the front of the left thigh back against the imaginary resistance on the back thigh and the real resistance of the tail, and dig your heel into the floor and wall. Be sure not to disturb the angle of the pelvis; push back on the left thigh, not the left hip. Pull the inner left ankle bone away from the floor to maintain the arch, and lift the inner left groin diagonally toward the outer hip.

Now press the webbing of your right hand into the right hip crease (fingers on the inner thigh, thumb pointing toward the buttock) between the pelvis and the top thigh. Exhale and slowly tip your torso to the right, over the plane of the right leg, creating space in the groin with the “wedge” of the hand. Watch carefully here. If you are tight in the hamstrings and groins you will tend to move into Triangle from your waist, not your hip, which will shorten your right side and “hump” your left, stretching the two sides of the spine unevenly. If you find yourself doing this, STOP. Lift the torso up slightly, push your right hand deep into the hip crease and re-extend the right side of your torso, and re-affirm the anchoring of the left heel. Continue moving into the posture as long as you can keep the two sides of your torso lengthened relatively evenly. At the limit of your stretch your spine may or

may not be parallel to the floor, depending on your flexibility. Remember it's more important to elongate your spine evenly than get your right hand on the floor. Slide your hand out of the hip crease and push the upper right buttock toward your tail. Then spread your palm on your sacrum and press it firmly against the back of your pelvis. Finally rest your hand on your support, whether the block or the chair, preferably with the right elbow straight. Make sure that your head is in a neutral position, with your ears equi-distant from the tops of your shoulders.

Press the base of your right index finger firmly against your support. Roll the head of the upper right arm bone (humerus) back, against the right shoulder blade. At the same time, firm both shoulder blades against the back ribs and pull them down the back, toward your tail, which in turn is growing down toward your anchoring heel. For this beginning practice, you can keep your left hand on your hip, or inhale and raise the arm toward the ceiling. Imagine that you are reaching both arms out of the center of your back, from a spot between the shoulder blades. Align the arms parallel to the top line of your shoulders rather than perpendicular to the floor. Face the left palm forward and press all the fingers together, stretching them out of the inner elbow to the ceiling.

Most instruction manuals show Triangle with the model's head turned to look up at the top hand (or thumb). My feeling is that beginners should keep their head in a neutral position until they learn how to lengthen the sides of the neck evenly and release the shoulder blades away from the ears.

Stay in the posture anywhere from 30 seconds to a minute, breathing softly. Exit with an inhale, initiating the upward movement by pressing the anchor heel actively into the wall and, if you have extended the left arm, reaching it strongly toward the ceiling. Once you are up, DON'T bring the feet together by shifting onto the right foot and swinging the left foot forward. Instead turn the feet parallel to each other, balance your weight evenly on the feet, and then walk them together. Repeat on the other side for the same length of time.

### **CONTINUING PRACTICE**

The continuing practice of Triangle is done away from the wall. Stand in Mountain Posture (*tadasana*) with your palms pressed together, thumbs resting on your sternum. Lift up from your inner ankles through the core of your torso to the crown of your head, and release down from the base of your skull through the tail and heels into the Earth.

Bend your knees slightly, exhale, and spring your feet lightly apart (your feet should just barely leave the floor). Land softly with your feet at the distance you found most steady and comfortable in your beginning practice. If you have any problems with your knees or back, step the feet apart, don't jump. As you jump, swing your arms out so that, when you land, the arms are stretched to your sides, parallel to the floor, palms down.

Turn the left foot in and the right foot out. Align the heels as you did for the beginning practice or, if you are more flexible in the groins and hips, align the right heel with the middle of the inner left arch. Anchor your left heel, then exhale and extend into the full posture. Rest your right hand on the support, or on your shin, ankle, or on the floor. As your flexibility increases and your spine lowers parallel to the floor, your bottom hand should be positioned directly under your right shoulder. Remember to keep your left arm very active as you move to the right and, once in

position, bring it parallel to the right arm.

Before you turn your head to the left, see that the two sides of the neck are evenly extended, and that the shoulder blades are pulled down the back toward the tail. Initiate the rotation of your head from the "root" of your neck, inside your upper back between the shoulder blades. Your chin should dip down slightly toward the left shoulder to keep the back of your neck long. Gaze up at your left thumb.

Stay from one to two minutes. Watch how, as you anchor the back heel ever deeper into the Earth, the posture seems to spontaneously "adjust itself" and your breath becomes soft and smooth. Come up on an inhale, bearing most of the body's weight on the back heel while you lighten the ball of the front foot on the floor. Repeat on the other side for an equal length of time.