

Skillful Sequencing

A regular Iyengar practice will certainly ensure proper alignment, but bet you never thought you could actually learn to smile too!

by Gerry Visco

Ask any Iyengar devotee, and he or she will explain that intelligent sequencing pampers both your body and spirit. So it's not surprising that one of the most distinctive qualities of Iyengar yoga is the variation of asana sequences. Throughout his 70 years of practice, BKS Iyengar systematized over 200 classical yoga asanas and 14 types of pranayama, all designed to guide beginners toward more advanced poses as they gain flexibility, strength, and deeper meditative practices.

An Iyengar practice can vary as much as the weather—depending upon the week of the month, the time of the day, the practitioners in a class, their levels of experience, the instructor's theme, and what poses had been taught during the previous few classes. All these variables enhance the fun and challenge of a class, making each practice fresh and vibrant as it nurtures and balances your body.

In Pune, India, the Iyengar family has set up a monthly series that focuses on a specific category of poses each week. This allows students who may only be able to attend one class a week to learn many poses and challenging variations. One pattern daughter Geeta Iyengar outlines in her book, *Yoga: A Gem for Women*, is to dedicate the first week of the month to standing poses, the second week to forward bends, the third to back bends, and the last week to restorative, which includes seated pranayama. (Since it can have a detrimental effect on the nervous system if practiced with incorrect alignment, seated pranayama is not usually introduced for the first six months to a year.)

Renowned for its therapeutic aspects, Iyengar yoga includes sequences to help such ailments as depression, fertility, heart conditions, scoliosis, and blood pressure with remarkable results. Practitioners often use props such as belts, blocks, ropes, chairs, bolsters, blankets, and specially constructed benches and wooden "horses" to aid in the healing process.

Although class sequencing can and does change, there are general rules and guidelines designed to provide optimum results and avoid injury. For example, Iyengar yogis always follow Sirsasana (Headstand) with Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand) or other neck-lengthening postures such as Halasana (Plow Pose), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), or Viparita Karani (Legs Up the Wall).

OTHER GUIDELINES INCLUDE:

- Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog) is a good preparation for all poses and counterbalances both forward bends and back bends.
- Standing poses prepare the body for forward bends or back bends.
- Forward bends are calming and have a cooling effect.
- Twists are neutralizing and are done after forward bends and back bends.
- Forward bends can alleviate anxiety, and back bends help with depression.
- Back bends create heat and are invigorating.
- Always cool down after a back-bending session with neutralizing poses.
- Heating poses are generally followed by cooling poses before Savasana (Corpse Pose).
- Inversions increase blood flow and circulation, calm the nervous system, and help relieve stress.

The sequences on the following pages show three levels of Iyengar yoga. All three levels emphasize balance, an important component of Iyengar yoga.

LEVEL ONE concentrates on standing poses, twists, and Shoulder Stand. Students learn how to shape the poses as they improve their strength, flexibility, and balance.

LEVEL TWO builds upon the standing poses and adds more revolved poses and twists, forward bends, inversions, and the beginnings of back bends. Students also begin learning seated pranayama.

LEVEL THREE intensifies the standing poses, twists, forward bends, and back bends, and students hold inversions for longer periods. Not just about doing difficult poses or physical tricks, this stage incorporates a profound intelligence and transformative method integrating the body with the mind, senses, and breath to create equanimity.

For more information on Iyengar sequences, read *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar, *Yoga: A Gem For Women* by Geeta Iyengar, and *Yoga: The Iyengar Way* by Silva Mehta, Mira Mehta, and Shyam Mehta.

Urdhva Baddhangulyasana (Mountain Pose with Arms Overhead): Standing in Tadasana, the foundation for all standing poses, intertwine your fingers and reach arms overhead to create a dynamic extension throughout the body.



LEVEL 1 SEQUENCE

Tadasana

Urdhva Hastasana

*Urdhva Baddhangulyasana

Vrksasana

Utthita Trikonasana

Virabhadrasana II

*Utthita Parsvakonasana

*Virabhadrasana I

Parsvottanasana
(arms down)

Prasarita Padottanasana

Adho Mukha Svanasana

*Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

*Chatush Padasana

*Salamba Sarvangasana

*Halasana

*Bharadvajasana
(chair or floor)

Swastikasana
(bend forward and rest head on chair)

Savasana

*poses shown

Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose): According to BKS Iyengar, you can keep your chest, hips, and legs in a line by moving your chest up and back. Stretch every part of your body, concentrating on the entire back, especially your spine.



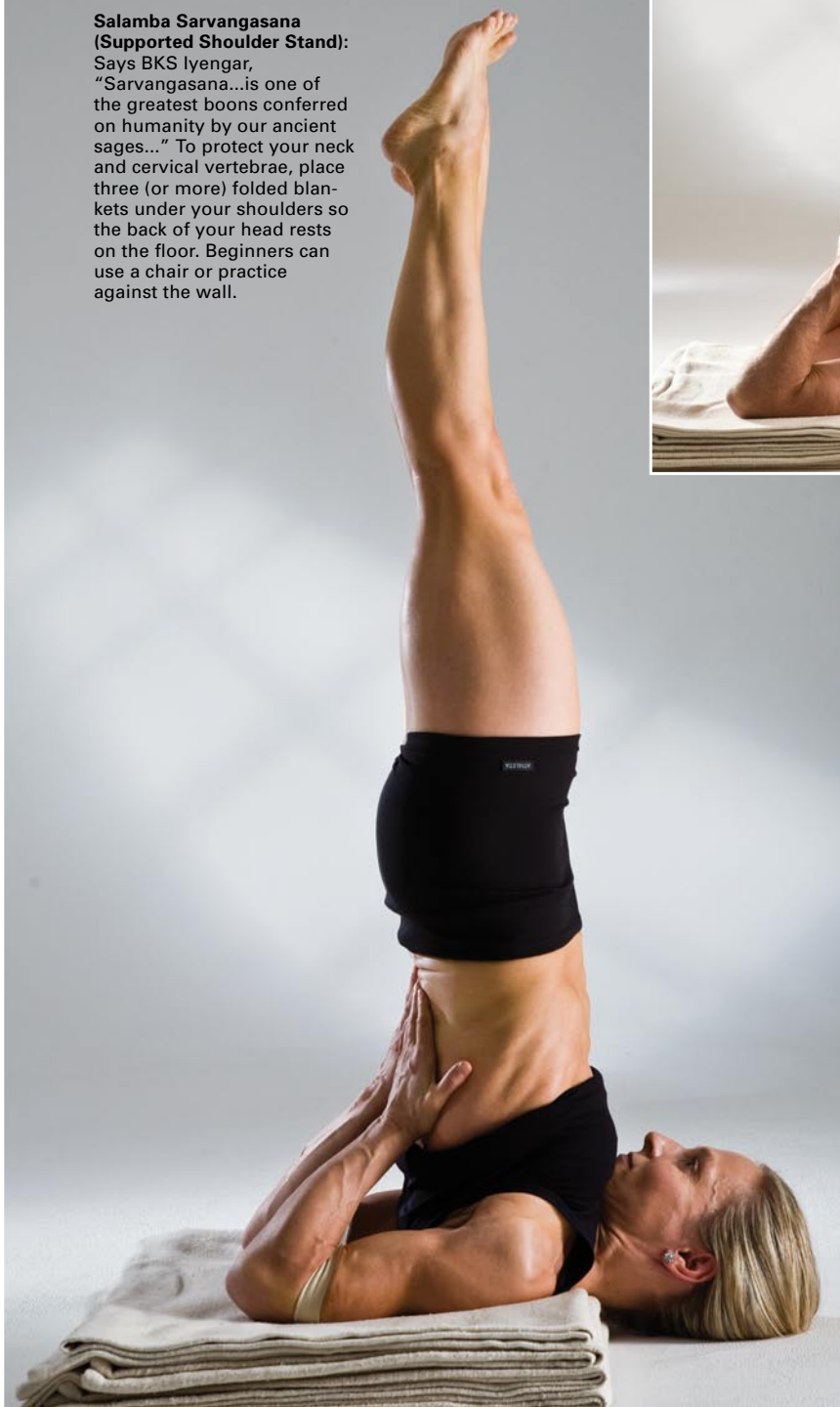
Chatush Padasana (Four-Limbed Pose): You can do Chatush Padasana, which is a good preparation for back bends, and also to learn the correct actions of Shoulder Stand. If you can't reach your hands around your ankles, use a strap; or place the backs of your hands on the floor and rest the soles of your feet on your palms.



Halasana (Plow Pose): Halasana is a continuation of Salamba Sarvangasana with the same blanket set-up. Keep your back long and straight, lift your legs toward the ceiling. Open your chest and the back of your knees. You can also do Halasana with your legs supported on a chair.

Bharadvajasana on chair (Bharadvaja's Pose): Practiced on a chair, this is excellent for beginners and pregnant women and is recommended after back bends. As you twist into the pose, lead with your chest, not your head. After your chest is open and parallel with the back of the chair, then turn your head.

Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulder Stand): Says BKS Iyengar, "Sarvangasana...is one of the greatest boons conferred on humanity by our ancient sages..." To protect your neck and cervical vertebrae, place three (or more) folded blankets under your shoulders so the back of your head rests on the floor. Beginners can use a chair or practice against the wall.



Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog): Rest the weight of your body on your palms; the insteps of your feet, pelvis, thighs, and knees lift off the floor. Push your chest forward between your arms. Keeping your legs active makes it less likely you'll have any lower back pain.

Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I Pose): Practice this pose, named after the brave Virabhadra, with the energy and focus of a warrior. Keep your bent knee in line with your heel, not extended past your ankle. Your back leg stays firm, your chest lifts, and your arms extend toward the ceiling.

Robin Janis (left) began studying Iyengar Yoga in 1986 and is a founding faculty member of the Iyengar Yoga Institute of New York. She is the owner of the Space For Grace yoga studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Her website is robinjanisyoga.com



LEVEL 2 SEQUENCE

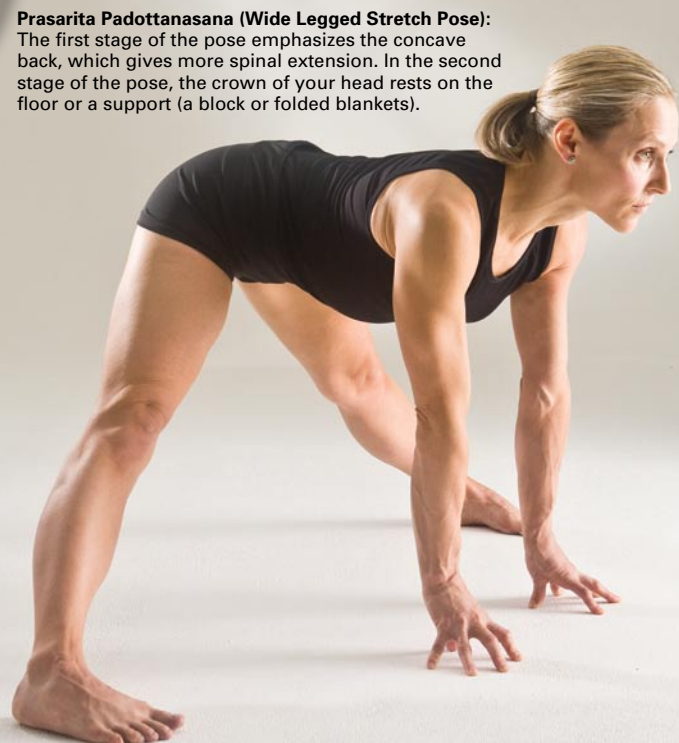
- Tadasana
- Gomukhasana
- Pascima Namaskarasana
- Utthita Trikonasana
- Parsvottanasana
(classic pose)
- *Parivrtta Trikonasana
- *Ardha Chandrasana
- *Prasarita Padottanasana
(I and II full poses)
- *Sirsasana
- Adho Mukha Virasana
- *Adho Mukha Svanasana
- *Ustrasana
- Purvottanasana
- Sarvangasana
- *Halasana
- Eka Pada Sarvangasana
- *Bharadvajasana
- Dandasana
- Adho Mukha Virasana
- Savasana
- *poses shown*



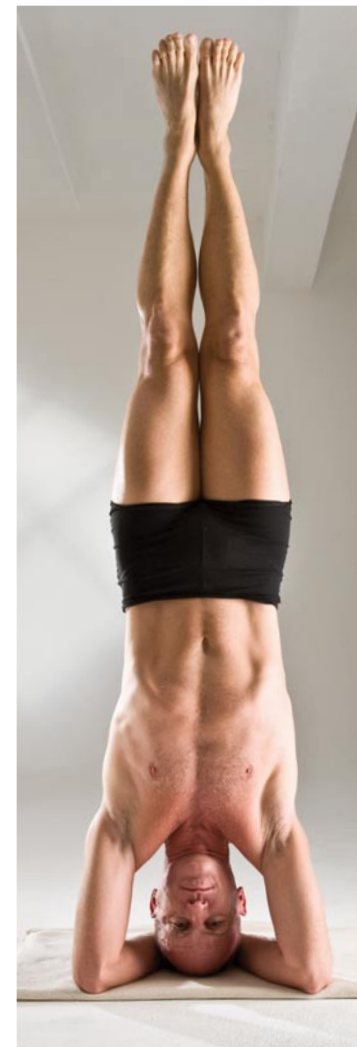
Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose): Make sure the distance between your feet isn't too short. Balance while fully rotating, extending your spine, and expanding your chest. Keep your buttocks and head in one line.



Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose): After you shift your weight to your right hand and right leg, lift your left leg and stretch your standing leg simultaneously. Try the pose with your back against the wall to solidify the alignment, extension, and opening of your chest.



Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide Legged Stretch Pose): The first stage of the pose emphasizes the concave back, which gives more spinal extension. In the second stage of the pose, the crown of your head rests on the floor or a support (a block or folded blankets).



Sirsasana (Headstand): "The back of the head, the trunk, the back of the thighs, and the heels should be in a line perpendicular to the floor and not inclined to one side." —BKS Iyengar.



Ustrasana (Camel Pose): The key to this pose is learning to fully open your chest and coil back over your trunk. Drop your head back only after you've totally opened your chest and shoulders. Fully lift your thighs to avoid lower back pain.

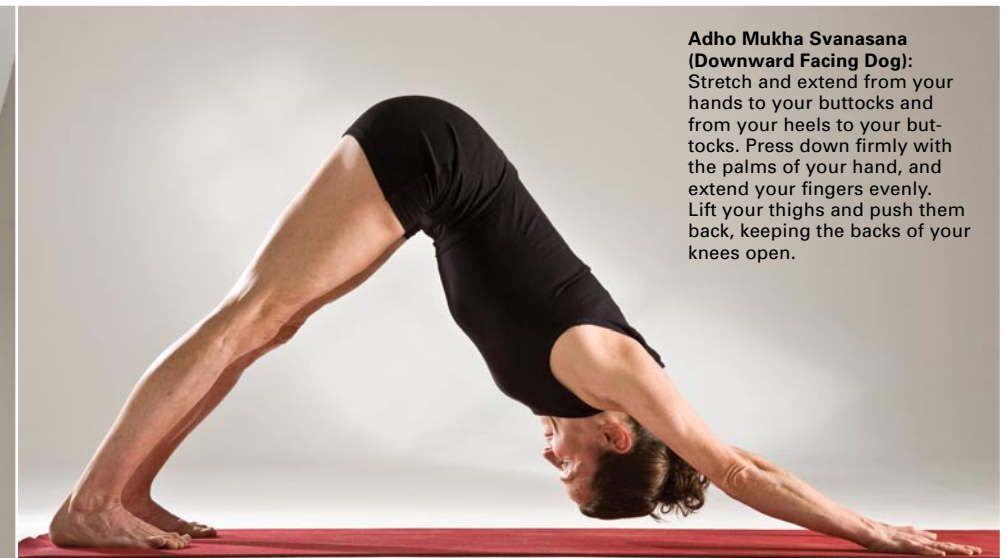


Halasana (Plow Pose): Beginners remain in Halasana for about 30 seconds, which increases up to 5 minutes for intermediate practitioners. In Halasana, the chest meets the chin in Jalandhara Bandha, an "energy lock" that's beneficial to your breath and glandular system. Keep the back of your neck and throat free.



Bharadvajasana: Done on the floor, this pose intensifies the wringing action and is more challenging for students with less flexibility in the pelvic area. In the completed pose, the back arm clasps the forward biceps.

Carrie Owerko (left), a core faculty member of the Iyengar Yoga Institute of New York, holds a Junior Intermediate III teaching credential and serves as an assessor for the Iyengar National Association. She travels regularly to India to study with the Iyengar family and has had the honor of co-choreographing and performing in "Live—Light on Life," a tribute to BKS Iyengar at New York City Center in 2005. For more info, visit carrieowerkoyoga.blogspot.com



Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog): Stretch and extend from your hands to your buttocks and from your heels to your buttocks. Press down firmly with the palms of your hand, and extend your fingers evenly. Lift your thighs and push them back, keeping the backs of your knees open.

LEVEL 3 SEQUENCE

Adho Mukha Svanasana

Tadasana

*Utthita Trikonasana

Parivrtta Trikonasana

Ardha Chandrasana

Parivrtta Ardha Chandrasana

*Virabhadrasana I and III

*Adho Mukha Vrksasana

*Pinca Mayurasana

Sirsasana

Parsva Sirsasana

*Back Bend over chair

*Urdhva Dhanurasana
(w/Eka Pada variations)

Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana
(w/ Eka Pada variations)

Adho Mukha Svanasana/
Uttanasana/Parsva Uttanasana

*Bharadvajasana II

Sarvangasana/Halasanana

*Setu Bandha Sarvangasana
(w/ Eka Pada variation)

Halasana

Pascimottanasana

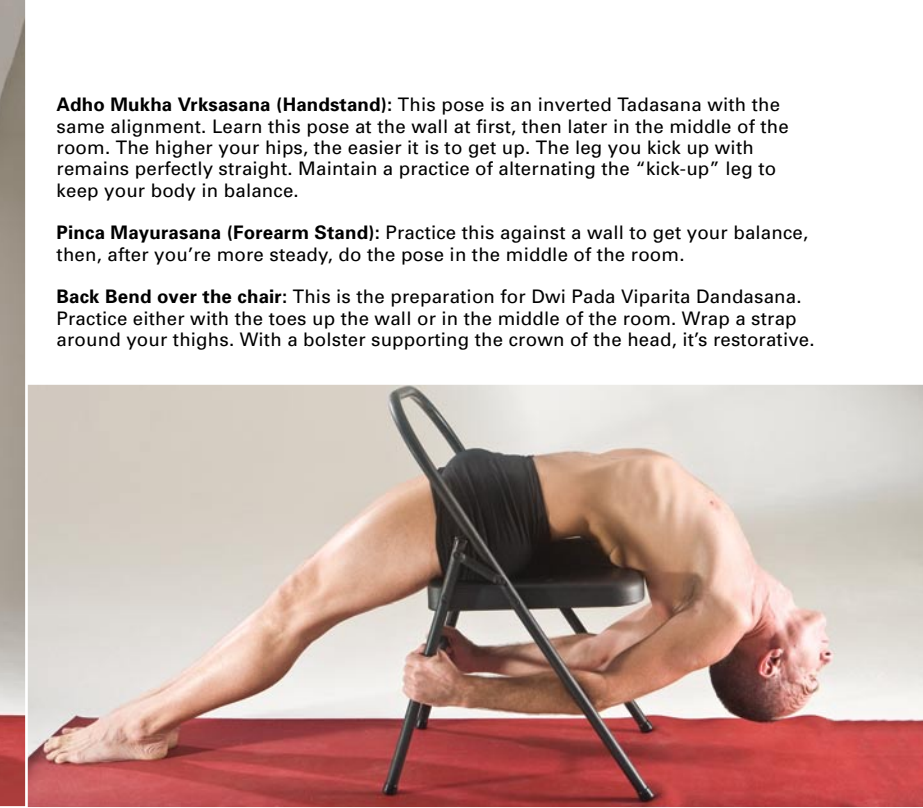
Savasana

*poses shown

Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose): In Iyengar yoga, we jump into this pose from Utthita Hasta Padasana (or step into it if there's an injury). You can hold the pose from 30 seconds to a minute or more on each side.



Virabhadrasana III (Warrior III Pose): Geeta S. Iyengar recommends concentrating as you balance. "If the body wavers, the mind wavers and if the mind wavers, the body wavers," she says. If balancing is difficult, do Virabhadrasana III with your fingertips touching the wall.



Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand): This pose is an inverted Tadasana with the same alignment. Learn this pose at the wall at first, then later in the middle of the room. The higher your hips, the easier it is to get up. The leg you kick up with remains perfectly straight. Maintain a practice of alternating the "kick-up" leg to keep your body in balance.

Pinca Mayurasana (Forearm Stand): Practice this against a wall to get your balance, then, after you're more steady, do the pose in the middle of the room.

Back Bend over the chair: This is the preparation for Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana. Practice either with the toes up the wall or in the middle of the room. Wrap a strap around your thighs. With a bolster supporting the crown of the head, it's restorative.

Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Facing Bow Pose): "To get a better stretch, exhale and pull your thigh muscles still higher by lifting your heels off the floor." —BKS Iyengar. "Extend the chest, stretch up the sacral region of the spine until the abdomen is taut as a drum, and then lower the heels to the floor, maintaining the stretch of the spine."





Bharadvajasana II (Bharadvaja's Pose): Geeta S. Iyengar recommends that you place one leg in Virasana, one leg in Padmasana before you turn the spine laterally. In lateral rotations, lift your spine first, then turn your abdomen, then your chest, and lastly your head. Move your shoulder blades in and up to help the rotation.

James Murphy is the Director of the Iyengar Yoga Institute of New York, a core faculty member, and co-teaches the Teacher Training Program. He holds an Intermediate Senior I certificate and serves as an assessor for IYNAUS. Since 1990, James has made extensive trips to study with the Iyengar family in Pune, India. James also leads annual yoga and cultural tours to exotic places such as Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Bali. For more info, go to yogaoutthere.com

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana with Eka Pada variations (Bridge Pose with One-Footed variations): Begin in Salamba Sarvangasana. To lessen the pressure on your elbows and wrists, stretch your back body toward your neck, keeping your feet firmly on the ground.

