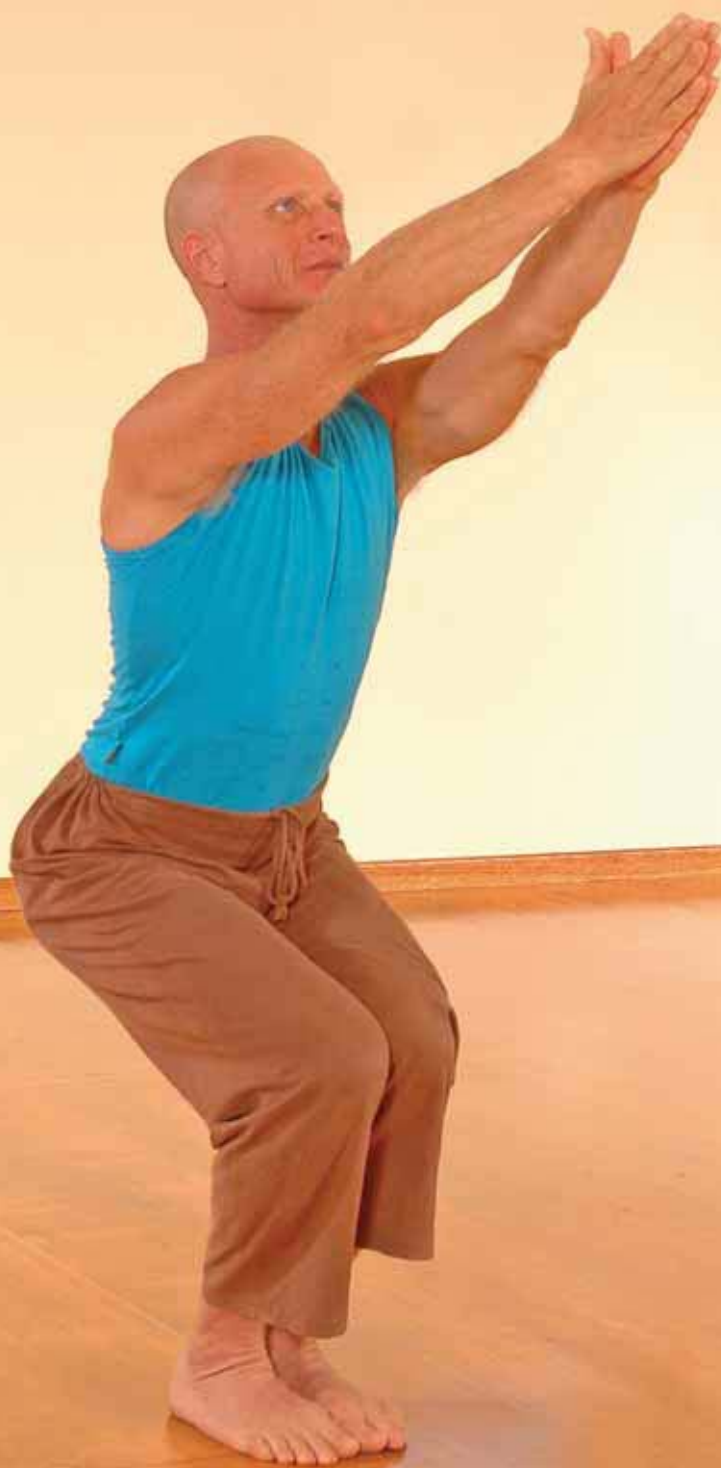


Utkatasana

- Fierce pose



Align yourself whole heartedly in this powerful pose. Develop one-pointed concentration as you strengthen your body and your will.

Asana instruction by Adam Bornstein

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Utkatasana is a breakthrough pose that can unleash your inner strength. If approached with clear intention, it will empower your confidence and help to pierce through any mental, physical or energetic stagnation, thereby liberating your vast reservoir of *prana* (life force). When you are attuned to the direction of the wisdom guidance within you – with your energy at your disposal, contained yet free flowing – anything is possible. Aligning *prana* to the power of your will is the secret to success in life.

The poses are not only physical techniques. Each of them is a blueprint for awakening. Intention, willpower, awareness, alignment and breath are the keys that can open the subtle mysteries of the asanas. Aligning these elements in yoga practice takes us beyond the physical into the grace and depth of our true nature.

We can read about Utkatasana to gain inspiration, but it is our own devoted practice that reveals its depth. The taste of a juicy mango can never be accurately described to you; you must taste it yourself to truly know it. My hope is that this article serves to further your own inspiration and joy in yoga. If you are new to Utkatasana, do not be discouraged if after a few breaths your thighs start to shake and you feel like collapsing. The strength to maintain this pose comes with consistent practise. Persevere and the hidden power of the asana will surely reveal itself to you.

You may find the initial benefits of physical strength and endurance expanding into your mental and emotional being as well. Mental clarity and emotional stability are experienced through dedicated practice. You may find your emotions balancing out as you gain the important quality of *titiksha* (even mindedness). If your thoughts,

emotions and energies are distracted and scattered like leaves blowing in the wind, you cannot be in the concentrated realm of yoga. Yoga serves to bring everything back home into unified wholeness.

Applied anatomy

LUMBAR SPINE: A key to safe spinal alignment is the action of the lower abdomen. The rectus abdominis muscle originates on the front of the pubic bone and inserts on the lower tip of the breastbone and ribs five to seven. This muscle runs vertically down the front of the abdomen. This and other mid-section muscles serve to stabilise our centre of gravity, which is located between the navel and the pubic bone. The pelvis and spine join at the sacroiliac joints. Therefore the spine and pelvis affect each other. Spinal alignment can be influenced from both the front and the back of the body.

TO EXPERIMENT: From a standing position with knees slightly bent, place one hand on the lower belly, just above where it joins the pubic bone, and the other hand on the back of the sacrum. Alternately lift up and release back down with the lower belly. Can you feel your tailbone lengthening downward as you pull up and moving back as you release?

This applied understanding will help you sensitively adjust your entire pelvis and spine in Utkatasana and in many other poses. This gentle lift of the lower belly will help you to decompress your lower back as well as to stabilise the entire mid-section. Avoid applying this action in excess. Too much tucking under of the pelvis will flatten the lumbar curve, thrust the pelvis forward, put extra stress on the knees and constrict the breath.

[essential guidelines]

- Begin with the easier variations of Utkatasana; honestly assess how you feel in the pose before attempting more challenging variations. Come into witness mind. Observe the breath. Is it flowing smoothly? Can you stay present with the asana without either running away or gripping the pose harshly? Can you be in the intensity with wholehearted interest?
- Give special attention to any potentially vulnerable areas such as knees, lumbar spine and cervical spine.
- When you flex your knees, some rotation can happen within the joint. With the feet apart, be sure to keep the knees the same distance apart as the ankles.
- Ideally, the eyes are relaxed yet focused. In general, wandering eyes mean a wandering mind. Still eyes will support a still mind. Feel your sight originating from behind the eyes.

[warm ups]

While Utkatasana is a heating pose in itself, practising a few specific warm-ups will prepare the body for the asana. Suggested warm-ups:

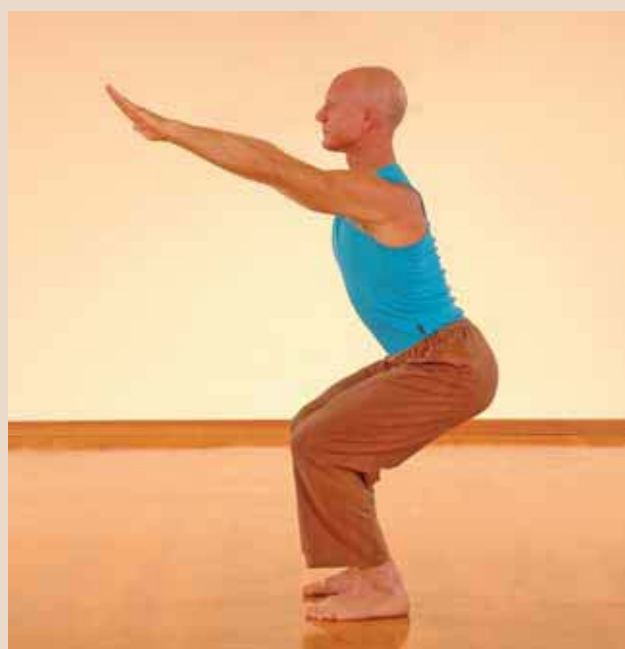
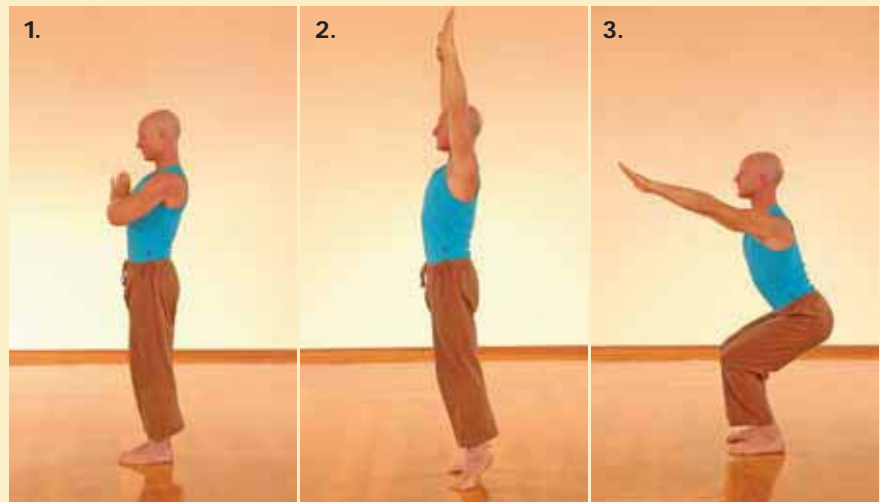
- Cat-Cow: spinal warming.
- Setu Bandhasana (Bridge pose): warming legs and spine.
- Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward facing dog pose): to develop shoulder flexion.
- Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutations): warming for the whole body, integrating body and mind.
- Gomukhasana (Cow face pose): to improve shoulder flexion and to open the upper chest.
- Balasana (Child's pose, arms extended variation): for shoulder, hip, knee and spine flexion.

[warming up – vinyasa style]

This flowing sequence will prepare your body and mind for sustained Utkatasana practise.

Begin in Tadasana (1). With an inhale, move to Utthitadasana (2). Exhaling move into Utkatasana (3). With an inhale lift back into Utthitadasana (2) and exhale back into Tadasana (1).

Repeat this sequence a few times, slowly increasing the number of breaths in Utkatasana.

**Variation 1: grounded and stable**

- The fingertips will be at eye level facing away from the body, with your palms facing down. This will provide a grounding effect. Keep the knees the same distance apart as the ankles.
- Inhale – exhale and move your hips back.
- Inhale and feel a rising sensation from the lower belly to the heart. Feel the response in the heart.
- Exhale and draw the arms back into the shoulder sockets and release the shoulders from the ears. With this action feel your heart broaden.
- Inhale and draw up energy from the earth to flood your whole body.
- Exhale back down to the feet, spreading your roots downward.
- Breathing smoothly, continue to hold the pose.
- Inhale return to the standing position.
- Exhale, relax and feel the after effects.

Variation 2: aligning with the centre

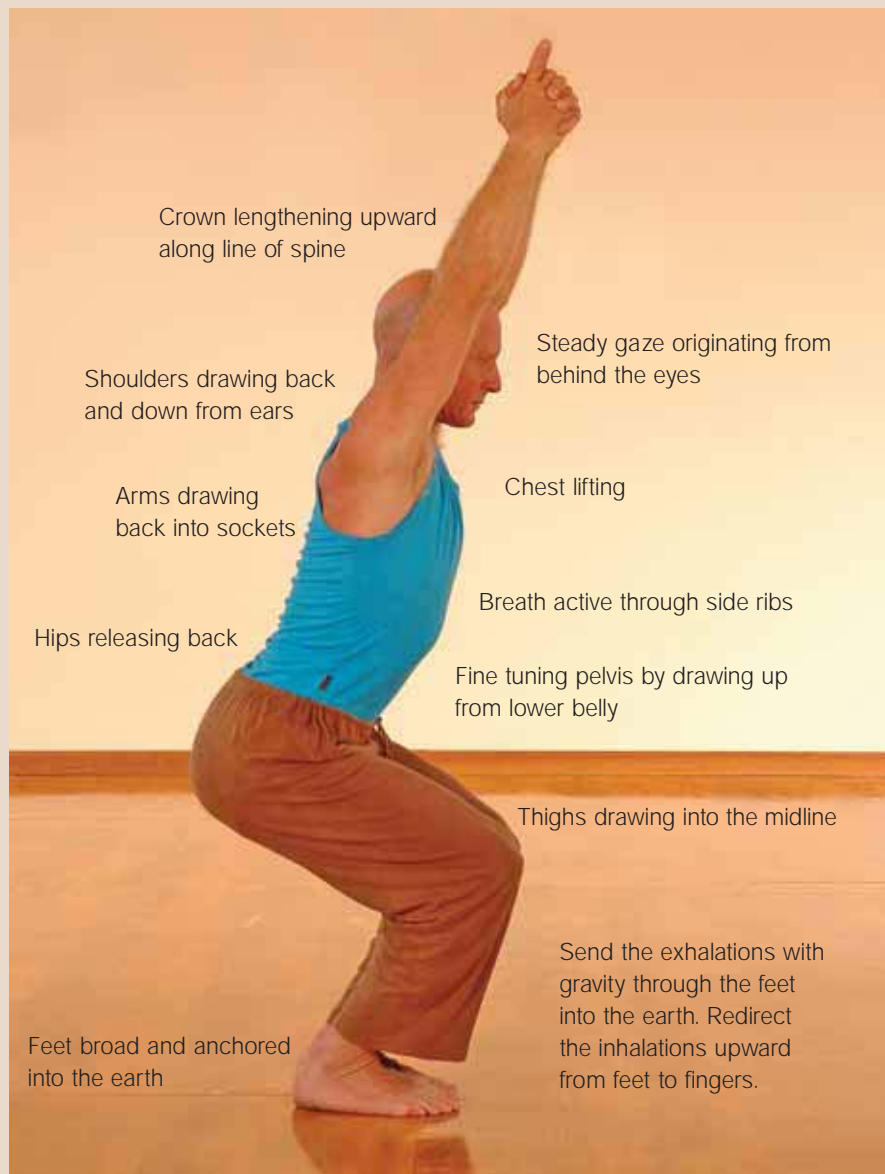
- In this variation the feet, legs and palms are joined together.
 - Begin in Tadasana (Mountain pose) with the feet together.
 - Inhaling, turn the palms to face forward, fingers towards the earth.
 - Exhaling, bend the joined knees and take the sitting bones back, folding at the hip creases.
 - Inhaling, bring your arms out to the sides and up past eye level to join the palms, feeling like you are pulling a cloak of light around your body. The heart lifts.
 - Exhaling draw the arms back into the shoulder sockets and glide the shoulder blades down the back.
 - Breathing steadily, sustain the pose for a few Ujjayi breaths.
 - Inhale and slowly come back to Tadasana.
 - Exhale and feel the after effects.
- Note:**
- Gaze between the two thumbs into the space where the tips of the thumbs separate.
 - The ideal is to have the palms pressing together as you maintain a broad chest and collarbones. If you find the chest collapsing, keep the hands apart.
 - Engage the knees, thighs and palms into the centre.
 - Draw up the lower belly to stabilise the mid-section, while sending the sitting bones back. Find the dynamic balance between these two actions.
 - As the legs pull in and the palms



press, feel your energy move into the centre of your being. You may feel a natural Mula Bandha (Root lock) forming in the perineum.

- As an option, repeat coming into and out of the pose until you are ready to sustain it with smooth breathing.

Variation 3: the next step – arms alongside the head



Crown lengthening upward along line of spine

Shoulders drawing back and down from ears

Arms drawing back into sockets

Hips releasing back

Feet broad and anchored into the earth

Steady gaze originating from behind the eyes

Chest lifting

Breath active through side ribs

Fine tuning pelvis by drawing up from lower belly

Thighs drawing into the midline

Send the exhalations with gravity through the feet into the earth. Redirect the inhalations upward from feet to fingers.

Lifting the arms alongside the ears creates a dynamic line of energy from the tailbone through the fingertips. The hands are in Temple Mudra, with fingers interlocked except the extended index fingers, increasing mental vigour. However, if lifting the arms above the head or joining the hands causes a collapse in the chest, return to an easier variation.

Stand in Tadasana when finished and feel the dynamic balance within.

Common errors

ERROR 1: Observe the collapsed chest, the compressed posterior neck and over-reaching arms.



REMEDY: Open the arms apart, lift the breastbone, slide the shoulder blades down the back and lengthen through the back of neck.

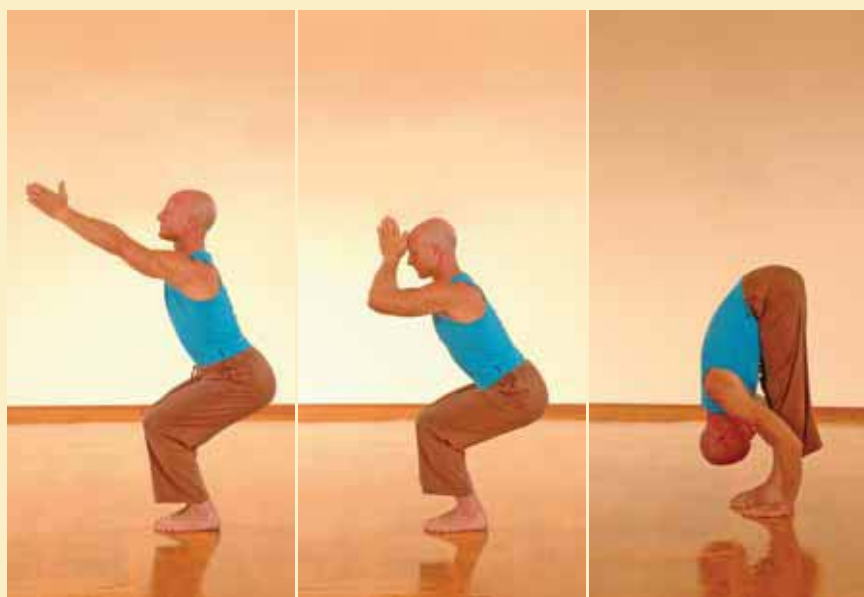
ERROR 2: Observe the pelvis pushed forward and excess weight stressing the knees.



REMEDY: Release the sitting bones back, folding at the hip creases. Feel weight coming back over the heels. If you feel compression in the lower spine, gently draw up on the pubic bone as you lift through the heart.

[practising utkatasana]

Utkatasana can be practised singularly or included in a vinyasa flow. An excellent way to experience the potency of the asana is to practise it within the Surya Namaskar series of poses. (See photos right for transition.) After flowing through the sequence a few times, come to Utkatasana. Hold the pose and breathe. Feel the energy of the gliding movements being offered into the stillness of the held pose. From action to stillness, connect with your stable centre. As you progress, challenge yourself by holding the pose longer. Gauge the quality of your pose by the quality of your breath.



ARMS AND SHOULDERS: In Utkatasana, to assist the opening of the heart region as well as to stabilise the entire upper body, draw the upper arms evenly back into their home in the shoulder sockets. While this action is subtle, its effects can be profound. Inhale into the expanding heart, exhale and feel the stability of body and emotions.

If the superior shoulder muscles, the upper trapezius, are tense and constricted, the shoulders will pull up towards the ears. This can be the cause of tension headaches, inhibited respiration and depressed mental states. By engaging the middle and lower fibres of the trapezius, we effectively draw the shoulders down from the ears, open the upper chest and begin to reverse this trend.

TO EXPERIMENT: Practise a few shoulder lifts – inhale and squeeze the shoulders up to the ears, exhale and take the shoulders back and down from the ears. Concentrate on the lower fibres of the trapezius contracting, drawing the shoulder blades down the back. In Utkatasana the idea is to keep the chest lifting, the shoulders moving back and down from the ears, while at the same time stabilising the mid-section.

The Breath

How you breathe in Utkatasana is vitally important. Without breath awareness there is no yoga. This asana offers the opportunity to expand breath capacity. By bringing awareness to the flow of the breath moving through the body, we improve concentration skills and become integrated. Breath awareness leads us into a meditative mind conducive to effective asana practice. Remember that both the inhalation and exhalation are important. Don't collapse your energy on the exhalation. Feel as if you are extracting the breath's energy from the inhalation and from the exhalation.

While sustaining the pose, lengthen and deepen the breath with the Ujjayi pranayama (Victorious breath). Direct the breath through the narrowed gap between the vocal chords.

In Utkatasana, as your breath capacity expands, take the inhalation smoothly into the side ribs. Feel the

ribcage spreading open as if the ribs were wings expanding out. As you exhale feel the ribs drawing back in. Feel the courageous attitude this inspires. Observe the breath from the inside. The breath is a living force. Merge with it and let it guide you into your natural state of dynamic stillness.

Sacred Balance.

In your practise of Utkatasana, let go of excess effort. Find the sacred balance of self effort with a focused yet relaxed inner attitude. This inner equanimity is one of the timeless powers that yoga instils in its dedicated practitioners.

It takes perseverance, concentration and willpower to tread the yogic path. The asanas cultivate these essential qualities within us. Using our will to actively enter into the river of evolution takes courage. If you are feeling stuck, begin now to dislodge the obstructions in your life's flow.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna represents each one of us on the battlefield of life. Krishna, the voice of the soul, is the charioteer. When Arjuna loses heart and is in despair, Krishna exhorts him to "take up your sword of truth and fight!" Each one of us has our own daily battles against the lower tendencies of lethargy and weak heartedness. Each one of us can learn to attune ourselves to the voice of our own soul wisdom, and to stand on our own two feet.

How? A daily discipline of yoga can be the springboard to provide the inner fortitude, enthusiasm and inspiration to awaken you to living a courageous life.

Include Utkatasana in your practice. As you focus your expanded gaze, as your purifying breath flows through the pose, feel your inner strength radiating forth from a place deep within.

Feel the asana like a sword piercing through restlessness and distraction. Each breath, each moment of concentrated awareness acts to clarify your being. As you challenge yourself in this pose, let go of grasping for it. Let it arise from within and shine through you. As you embody its message of calm, contained strength, re-enter your day in dynamic peace, ready to serve as an instrument for Truth.

Benefits

- Powerfully strengthens the thigh muscles.
- Contributes to knee stability by strengthening the muscles around the knees.
- Improves posture by strengthening and balancing the anterior, posterior and lateral muscles of the torso.
- Strengthens arms and shoulders.
- Strengthens ankles and improves arches of the feet.
- Improves breathing; expands breath capacity.
- Teaches proper alignment for the lumbosacral spine.
- Teaches concentration and even mindedness.
- Stabilises the emotions.
- Engages and directs willpower one-pointedly.
- Unifies body, breath and mind.

[cautions + contraindications]

- Destabilised knee ligaments: never move into pain; focus on pain free alignment.
- High blood pressure: never strain; keep arms lower than heart.
- During menstruation: never strain; practise gentle vinyasa style.
- Sacroiliac joint problems: never move into discomfort

Adam and his partner Akash are founders of Radiant Light Yoga. They began their study and practice of yoga in 1980 and have been training yoga teachers for over 10 years. This year they will be holding courses in Brisbane and on the Sunshine Coast. Visit them at www.radiantlightyoga.com