

Virabhadrasana I

Warrior Pose

DISCOVER YOUR INNATE RESOURCES OF STABILITY, STRENGTH, AND EXPANDED AWARENESS THROUGH THIS POWERFUL ASANA. WITHIN THIS EXCEPTIONAL POSE LIE

ESSENTIAL KEYS TO TAP INTO AND INCREASE YOUR INNER FIRE OF ENTHUSIASM AND JOY. VIRABHADRASANA INVITES YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN YOUR UNFOLDMENT AND DISSOLVE OBSTACLES IN YOUR LIFE.

BY ADAM BORNSTEIN

E

Emergence: defined in *Webster's Dictionary* as an act of emerging, to come into view, to become manifest, to rise from an obscure condition, to come into being through evolution.

This word clearly describes the effects of yoga practice. The Virabhadrasana series of poses serves us particularly well in this evolutionary process.

Observe the action of new growth in nature. The plant sets its roots into the nurturing earth, becoming stable and grounded in order to facilitate the stem rising upwards towards the sun.

Virabhadrasana 1 follows this same process. As you plant your roots through your feet and legs, your spine is liberated to ascend vertically skyward. When practised with awareness you can tangibly feel a movement of energy upward through your body, akin to the flow of sap up the inner core of a tree trunk. The roots of a tree draw up nutrients that flow upward to the top branches; in this posture life-giving force is magnetically drawn into the core of the body and pulled upward towards the brain and fingertips.

It's important to remember that the various asanas are meant to penetrate through all the various levels of our being. The physical template of the pose acts on our energy flow as well as our senses, mind, and consciousness.

BENEFITS

- Opens chest, shoulders and ribcage, facilitating deep breathing.
- Opens groin and stabilises pelvic girdle.
- Strengthens legs, spinal muscles, and arms.
- Tones abdominal area, developing core

strength which will assist in protecting the sometimes-vulnerable lumbar spine.

- Purifies the body and energy channels, clears out the mind.
- Encourages prana to flow upward.
- Develops confidence and courage.

CAUTIONS

High blood pressure – if needed, place palms together at the heart, or on pelvic rim. Avoid straining.

Knee instability or injury – be careful of knee alignment and don't come into the lunge so deeply.

Lower back injury – avoid all hinging into the lumbar spine. Draw the navel back towards spine and lengthen torso vertically.

GUIDELINES

It is important to modify the pose to suit your body and energy as it is

right now, as opposed to yesterday's level or a future fantasy. There are some potent variations that you can choose from to fit your present reality. Feel the asana emerging from a place deep inside you, not as

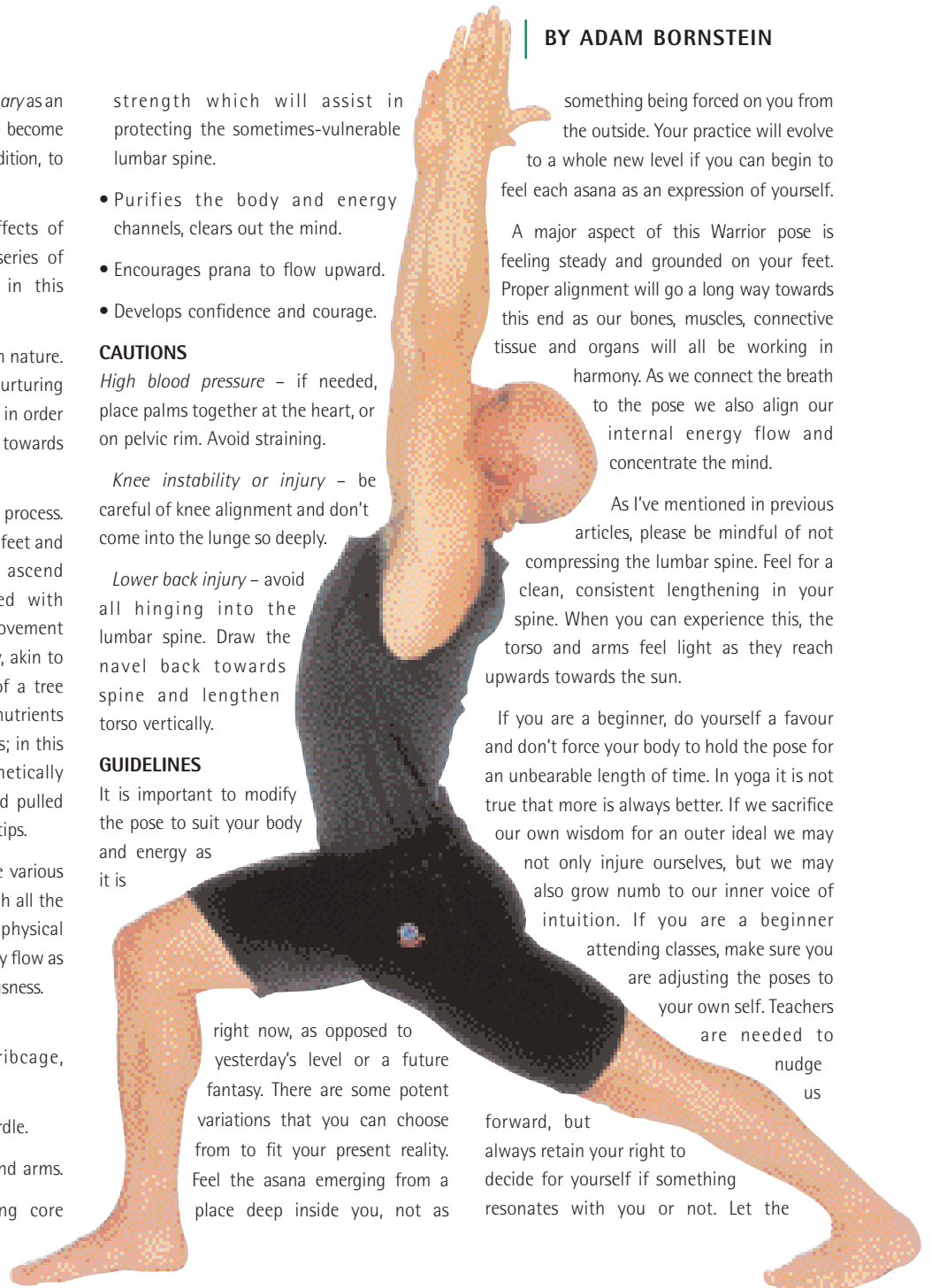
something being forced on you from the outside. Your practice will evolve to a whole new level if you can begin to feel each asana as an expression of yourself.

A major aspect of this Warrior pose is feeling steady and grounded on your feet. Proper alignment will go a long way towards this end as our bones, muscles, connective tissue and organs will all be working in harmony. As we connect the breath to the pose we also align our internal energy flow and concentrate the mind.

As I've mentioned in previous articles, please be mindful of not compressing the lumbar spine. Feel for a clean, consistent lengthening in your spine. When you can experience this, the torso and arms feel light as they reach upwards towards the sun.

If you are a beginner, do yourself a favour and don't force your body to hold the pose for an unbearable length of time. In yoga it is not true that more is always better. If we sacrifice our own wisdom for an outer ideal we may not only injure ourselves, but we may also grow numb to our inner voice of intuition. If you are a beginner attending classes, make sure you are adjusting the poses to your own self. Teachers are needed to nudge us

forward, but always retain your right to decide for yourself if something resonates with you or not. Let the



feeling inside you be the supreme teacher, not the flexible student in front of you or the glossy photo in the book (including this one!) At the same time be honest with yourself. If you continually follow the same path of least resistance you may not progress.

Avoid being mechanical and remember the sacredness of the asanas. This is a divine art. Respect and honor yourself. We are all in the process of evolution. Take it one loving step at a time.

I will share with you some different variations. If you are new to this pose begin with the easy variation and progress forward step by step.

PREPARATION

To open and strengthen the body along the specific pathways of Virabhadrasana 1, I recommend the following preparatory practices.

From the table position – spinal and hip flexion and extension. This excellent warming sequence is very efficient in stretching and strengthening the front and back of the spine as well as the front and back of the hips and legs.

The muscles along the spine (erector spinal) as well as the smaller intrinsic connective tissues and muscles that connect vertebra to vertebra are warmed, lengthened and strengthened. The front of the torso is also beneficially activated. The hip flexors (the muscles that draw the thigh up towards the belly, mainly rectus femoris and ilio-psoas) are both lengthened and strengthened as well as the muscles that cause the hip and upper leg to extend (mainly the hamstrings and buttocks). In addition, the abdominal muscles are toned, which is important for a good posture and a healthy back.

Begin the table pose with knees under hips, hip width apart and hands under shoulders, shoulder width apart. Practise the basic Cat/Cow sequence first (not shown). On an exhale tuck the tailbone under, draw the belly up towards the spine as you press the hands down and move your chin towards the chest. This is spinal flexion. Then, inhaling – draw your sitbones back, open the chest forward and slowly lift the head as you complete the inhale. This is spinal extension.

Photos 1A & 1B: Now we're going to continue this movement, adding the hip flexion/extension into the flow. The beginning



Photo 1A



Photo 1B

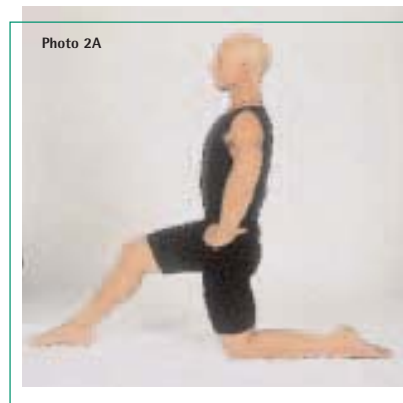


Photo 2A

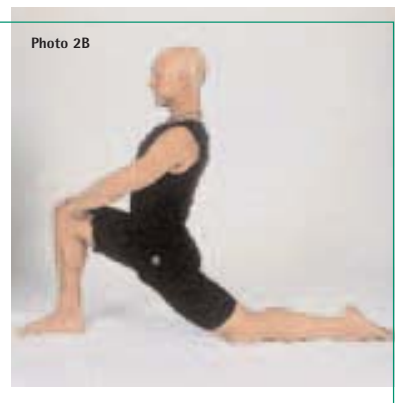


Photo 2B

table pose will be the same except the knees will be together under the pelvis (this will help with stability as it keeps the weight centred directly below the pelvis as we lift one leg up at a time).

Photo 1A: On the exhale follow the above directions plus point your right toes and move the right knee towards the chin. The leg will come off the floor as the right knee and chin move toward each other. Pull up the belly to the spine as you empty the lungs.

Photo 1B: As you inhale begin to stretch the right leg back behind you. Don't let the knee splay open; keep the right kneecap and toes facing the floor. This will minimise any torquing of the sacrum or spine. You can press through the back heel as you lift the leg to increase the strengthening effect. Repeat a few times on both sides.

Important: As you extend the leg back avoid sagging into the lower back. Keep the navel pulled up towards the spine. This is for lumbar spine safety as well as maximising the stability-building aspect of this sequence. This simple instruction has the potential to radically improve your Virabhadrasana practice. We will come back to this in our look at the variations of the pose.

This flow is very effective as a warm-up and is excellent as a prep for Virabhadrasana 1. We

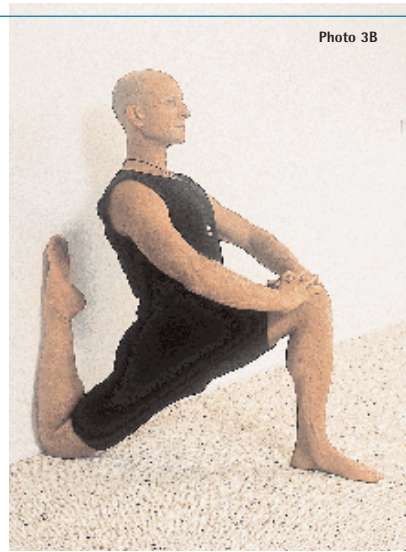
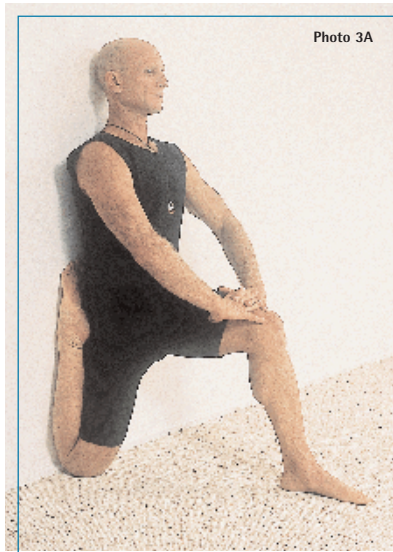
can begin to feel the interplay of the various aspects of the asana and begin to develop a profound full body perspective where all the various parts are integrated into wholeness.

Photos 2A & 2B: After practising the sequence above, come into a basic lunge. Place your hands either on your front knee or at the pelvic rim. Put padding under the back knee if needed.

Photo 2A: With the back knee on the ground and the front shin vertical, foot flat on floor, inhale straightening front knee and placing weight back onto the back shin. As you move back with the weight of the torso, draw the navel back towards the spine. Feel this simple action directing the action of the movement. Lengthen the spine vertically as you draw the tailbone under.

Photo 2B: Exhale and retaining the tucking under action of the pelvis, move the pelvis forward into the lunge. Make sure the front knee is moving towards the centre of the foot and not collapsing internally. Spend a few breaths here enjoying the lengthening sensation on the front of the back thigh. Repeat on the other side. To deepen the stretch you can press down towards the floor with the back shin and foot.

By lengthening the major hip flexors pressure is taken off the spine and you will have greater



movement in the sacrum/lumbar area as well as a greater ability to maintain Virabhadrasana 1 in safe and stable alignment. The psoas originates at the lumbar spine and inserts at the inner femurs (thigh bones). If this muscle is tight the lumbar spine may suffer from over-compression. Feel free to experiment by inhaling up again before exhaling forward perhaps a bit deeper than before. If you are looking for a still deeper lunge experience see next photos.

Photos 3A & 3B: This pose is only for experienced students who know their body. Come close to a wall and place your right shin and foot vertically up the wall with your knee at the corner junction of the wall and the floor. Place the front foot in the lunge position and your hands on the front knee or pelvic rim. Feeling anything yet?

Photo 3A: Slowly press the front foot solidly down and move your pelvis back towards the wall. You may feel the stretch more acutely in the lower and middle front thigh. As you bring the pelvis towards the wall the stretch is transferred away from the ilio-psoas and directly into the quadriceps muscles.

Photo 3B: From here draw the tailbone under and exhaling begin moving the pelvis forward and away from the wall and into the lunge. Remember about the front knee alignment, keep the knee tracking towards the centre of the foot. Keep the front heel down and the shin vertical as you move forward. Where do you feel it now? Most likely higher up on the thigh, because as you extend the

hip/leg back, the stretch is directed into the ilio-psoas and upper rectus femoris muscles. Try to feel the strengthening of the muscles of the back thigh and buttocks, remembering that the muscles most often work in pairs. Breathe smoothly and steadily and release deeply with mindfulness. Come out of the pose carefully, practise on the other side then rest for a few breaths in Child pose.

Please be especially careful with this one! Remember you always have a choice of what you do or don't do. This pose is very influential in lengthening the hip flexors and if practised consistently with care will assist in taking your Virabhadrasana 1 deeper and safer (especially for the lumbar spine). The increased awareness and sensitivity will serve you well as you continue into the asana.

PROGRESSION INTO VIRABHADRASANA 1

Knee safety is vitally important in all the standing poses, and especially in any lunges. If you ever feel any sharp twinges in your knees, your body is telling you something: Back off!

Photo 4: This variation works really well in training us to maintain a healthy spinal position in the pose. It is a good intermediary step from the knee down lunge towards the more advanced variations.

From a standing position take a step back with the right leg, approximately 1m. Place your hands on the rim of the pelvis. Take a breath in and feel a rising sensation from the pelvic floor to the crown of the head. At the top of the inhale feel your collarbones broaden from the base of the throat to the outer edge

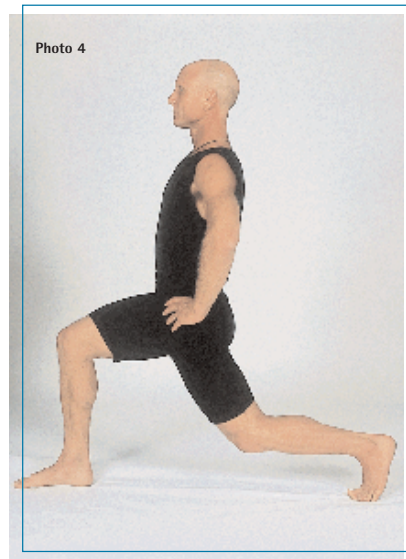
of your shoulders. On your exhale swivel the right heel to vertical and begin bending the front (left) knee. The right heel will lift off the floor, so you will be situated on the ball of the right foot with the toes pointing forward. The front knee does not collapse in, it tracks directly forward so that left front hip, knee, and foot are all lined up. The front shin is moving towards being vertical as the thigh moves towards being parallel with the floor thus forming a right angle. Allow the back knee to bend a little. This will unlock the pelvis allowing you to rotate the pelvis under to erase any lumbar compression. Inhale from the pelvic floor up the core of your torso, pulling the internal energy up the spine; as you exhale, stabilise the hips, legs, and feet.

Ideally both front hips as well as your chest are facing forward. You may have to do a slight self-adjustment by moving the right hip forward and left hip back to equalise the pelvis. Can you hold and breathe here? Make any subtle adjustments you need to as you hold for a few breaths. Mindfully exit the pose, return to standing for a restful interiorisation, and then practise on the other side with the same awareness.

Photo 5: It's time to bring the arms into the picture. To begin with, follow the same directions as for the last variation. Now, begin pressing through the back heel straightening the leg. Do you feel some pressure in the lower back? To lengthen through the spine, press strongly through the back heel (you can use a wall), whilst lifting energetically upward through the breastbone. Visualise the middle part of your spine (thoracic) moving forward into your body and up towards your already lifting breastbone.

Now it starts to get really interesting as we bring the arms into play.

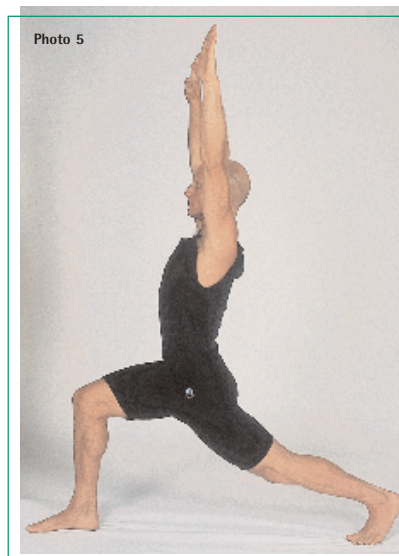
Continue pressing back through the heel and begin lifting the arms in front, palms facing down. Simultaneously draw back the sides of the waist and navel back towards the spine. Notice the effect in the lumbar spine; ideally you have just created more space. As the arms rise up higher, continue taking the waist/navel back. When your arms and hands face up at a diagonal begin to lift straight up through the spine. Draw the arms up all the way alongside the ears palms facing forward. Feel your inhale touch the fingertips. As you exhale maintain the



lifting action, and allow your shoulders to melt down from the ears, broadening the shoulders. Breathe softly, gazing forward with relaxed face and clear mind. Ideally the lifting action of the arms and drawing in of the navel is all completed in one smooth inhalation. It is okay to take a number of breaths in the beginning to really understand the flow. Be sure to maintain the stabilisation of the lower body throughout the pose. When you are ready to exit the pose, lower the arms on an exhale, step forward on an inhale, and exhaling relax and feel the effects in standing pose. When you are ready, practise on the other side for an equal duration. Be as attentive as you were on the first side.

Photo 6: For this variation we will turn the back heel in towards the centre line with the toes turned out at approximately 45-60 per cent. The ideal here is to maintain both hips facing forward. If you open the back foot too far out to the side it will be difficult to turn the pelvis to face forward. This variation asks for flexibility in the calf muscles (mostly the gastrocnemius). With consistent practise and modifying some of the common poses to accentuate this area you can increase your flexibility while not sacrificing stability.

Follow everything that's been shared so far. As you begin to press the back heel towards the floor, do your best to keep the pelvis squarely facing forward. To aid this, draw the outer hips in towards the centre point of the pelvic floor. This will serve to stabilise the pelvis and legs and give freedom to the ascension of the spine. From that central point inhale a current of prana up your spine. Feel your spine become more

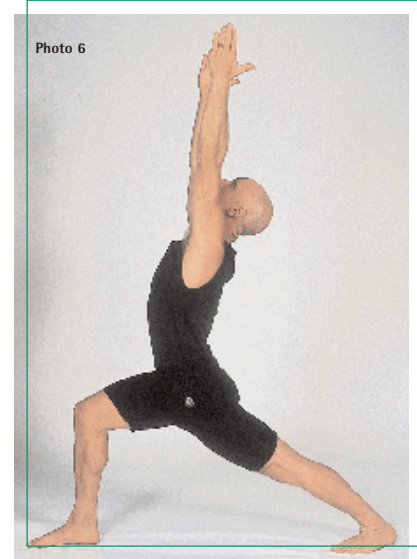


spacious as the energy flows upward. Let your alignment be refined around this energised core.

With the front knee in good, sound alignment, and without collapsing into the front hip joint, draw the sides of the waist/navel back towards the spine, press the back heel earthward and lift the arms in front and upwards, influencing the spine to ascend. Feel space in the back of the spine as well as the front. Avoid hinging back into the lumbar spine. If you need to take it in steps, bring your hands to the heart, draw the navel back again and inhaling lift the arms and spine up. Lean forward a bit with the chest if need be if you tend to close down the lumbar spine in the pose.

The arms are long, with the shoulders released down from the ears. Open your arms wide enough apart so that the shoulders and neck are not impinged. Reach long through the fingertips. The reaching up through the arms and hands will take pressure off the spine.

You may want to turn the palms in towards each other. If it feels good and you are well-balanced begin to take the head back, gazing joyfully into the sky, as if through a tunnel formed by the arms. If you've prepared you will feel your expanded awareness taking in your whole body at once. You may be looking up, and yet you feel the feet and legs nestled into the supporting earth, the back leg and foot like a strong pillar moving back into space to bond with the earth while the front bent leg, while strong and stable, also yields and is sensitive to every breath and makes fine adjustments if needed. Feel the waist, belly, and spine all being



energetically lifted upward, rebounding off the earth to touch the sun. When you are ready to come out of the pose, do so smoothly and consciously. Let the flow of your expanded energy wash over your consciousness, taking you deep within. Practise on the other side with the same focus. Enjoy.

CONCLUSION

The teachings of yoga share with us that we are whole, radiant, divine beings right now. What gets in the way of this truth is simply a matter of misperception. We think that we are limited, bound, fragmented and incomplete. Yoga shows us the way to remember who we really are. It is not an adding on of our divinity, it is a dropping away of all that is false and impermanent.

The interesting paradox is that we have to put out some effort to reclaim our true awakened nature. The practices of yoga provide the vehicle for this journey of returning to our Self. The yoga asanas can be an excellent starting point.

In the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali it states, "Yoga is experienced in that mind which has ceased to identify itself with its vacillating waves of perception and when this happens then the Seer is revealed, resting in its own essential nature, and one realises the True Self". (Book 1, Sutras 2 and 3.)

Webster's Dictionary defines vacillation as: "to sway through lack of equilibrium, to waver in mind, will, or feeling, an inability to make a stand". You may have already noticed in your own life the power that yoga holds to bring

you into a still, stable state of body and mind. You may also have experienced moments where your mind was vacillating but you were not identifying or attaching to its movements. At these times you are not running away, you are quietly witnessing, with compassion and caring.

These vacillations, explains Patanjali, can be neutralised by a combination of consistent, enduring practice and an attitude of non-attachment. Can we let go of grasping for results? Can we keep going for it with our practice? Can we embody a balance of the two in all aspects of our life? Think about it. From our yoga techniques to our primary relationship and everything in between, if we can stay awake and pro-active while softening our need for life to be a set way, there will so much less suffering and pain. Life will bring us challenges; it seems to be inherent in our earthly journey, yet these yogic tools can provide the bedrock for living a skilful and fulfilling life.

Here is a way to approach the Warrior pose with this emphasis: As you begin your asana practice observe where your mind is. Let your attention settle on the breath and the

sensations in your body. Remember the mind is not the enemy, we simply need to give it a proper job to do.

As you place yourself in Virabhadrasana 1, be aware as to which variation is the right fit for you at this moment. Let go of excessive force and struggling against your nature. Feel the breath expanding from your belly core on the inhalation to the outer skin and back again on the exhalation. Witness with open awareness any subtle adjustments you could do to create more freedom in the pose. Make the changes and begin drawing the breath energy into the pelvic floor. As you inhale, feel the breath energy being pulled up as if through a tube. Like a mighty river, feel this upsurge pulling into its wake any vacillations in body and mind. Keep your vision soft and expanded whether you are gazing upwards or straight ahead. Draw the breath energy up to the spiritual eye the point between the eyebrows, allow it to rest there for a moment, opening to the Universe. Let go of any burdens you may be carrying. As you exhale, draw down into yourself any positive qualities you need in your life. Take the exhalation all the way to the feet. Perhaps you can begin to feel clarity and inner freedom in

your mind, as well as stability in your body.

Celebrate the gift of your body, breath and mind. Respect the gift of life-giving prana moving through your body. Feel within the depths of your being your own sleeping spiritual warrior. Breathe the breath of life into this living presence and remember who you really are behind any temporary vacillations: perfect Love.

Clothing by Pranava.

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REFERENCES

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, interpreted by Mukunda Stiles, Weiser Books

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