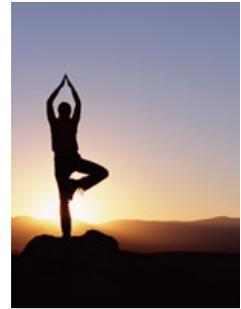


Here Comes the Sun

That most familiar of asana sequences, Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) is as rich in symbolic and mythic overtones as it is in physical benefits.



By Richard Rosen-For Yoga Journal

In many cultures, light has long been a symbol of consciousness and self-illumination. "The world begins with the coming of light," wrote Jungian analyst Erich Neumann in *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton University Press, 1995). "Opposition between light and darkness has informed the spiritual world of all peoples and molded it into shape.

Our primary source of light is, of course, the sun. When we look at our closest star, we may see nothing more than a big yellow ball. But for thousands of years, the Hindus have revered the sun, which they call Surya, as both the physical and spiritual heart of our world and the creator of all life itself. That's why one of Surya's many other appellations is Savitri (the Vivifier), who, according to the Rig Veda, "begets and feeds mankind in various manners" (III.55.19). Moreover, since everything that exists originates from the sun, as Alain DaniŽlou wrote in *The Myths and Gods of India* (Inner Traditions, 1991), it "must contain the potentiality of all that is to be known." For the Hindus, the sun is the "eye of the world" (*loka chakshus*), seeing and uniting all selves in itself, an image of and a pathway to the divine.

One of the means of honoring the sun is through the dynamic asana sequence Surya Namaskar (better known as Sun Salutation). The Sanskrit word *namaskar* stems from *namas*, which means "to bow to" or "to adore." (The familiar phrase we use to close our yoga classes, *namaste—te* means "you"—also comes from this root.) Each Sun Salutation begins and ends with the joined-hands *mudra* (gesture) touched to the heart. This placement is no accident; only the heart can know the truth.

The ancient yogis taught that each of us replicates the world at large, embodying "rivers, seas, mountains, fields...stars and planets...the sun and moon" (Shiva Samhita, II.1-3). The outer sun, they asserted, is in reality a token of our own "inner sun," which corresponds to our subtle, or spiritual, heart. Here is the seat of consciousness and higher wisdom (*jnana*) and, in some traditions, the domicile of the embodied self (*jivatman*).

It might seem strange to us that the yogis place the seat of wisdom in the heart, which we typically associate with our emotions, and not the brain. But in yoga, the brain is actually symbolized by the moon, which reflects the sun's light but generates none of its own. This kind of knowledge is worthwhile for dealing with mundane affairs, and is even necessary to a certain extent for the lower stages of spiritual practice. But in the end, the brain is inherently limited in what it can know and is prone to what Patanjali calls misconception (*viparyaya*) or false knowledge of the self.

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History and Practice

There's some disagreement among authorities over the origins of Sun Salutation. Traditionalists contend that the sequence is at least 2,500 years old (perhaps even several hundred years older), that it originated during Vedic times as a ritual prostration to the dawn, replete with mantras, offerings of flowers and rice, and libations of water. Skeptics of this dating maintain that Sun Salutation was invented by the raja of Aundh (a former state in India, now part of Maharashtra state) in the early 20th century, then disseminated to the West in the 1920s or 1930s.

However old Sun Salutation is, and whatever it may originally have looked like, many variations have evolved over the years. Janita Stenhouse, in *Sun Yoga: The Book of Surya Namaskar* (Innerspace Map Studio, 2001), illustrates two dozen or so adaptations (though several are quite similar). Our sequence here consists of 12 "stations" composed of eight different postures, the last four being the same as the first four but performed in reverse order. In this sequence, we'll start and end in Tadasana.

The eight basic postures, in order of performance, are Tadasana (Mountain Pose), Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute), Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Lunge, Plank Pose, Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose), Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward-Facing Dog Pose), and Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose).

The transition from posture to posture is facilitated by either an inhalation or an exhalation. As you move through the sequence, watch your breath closely. Slow your pace or stop and rest entirely if your breathing becomes labored or shuts down altogether. Always breathe through your nose, not your mouth: Nasal breathing filters and warms incoming air and slows your breathing down, thereby lending the sequence a meditative quality and reducing the risk of hyperventilation.

To perform the sequence, start in Tadasana, with your hands together at your heart. Inhale and lift your arms overhead to Urdhva Hastasana, then exhale while lowering the arms down and fold your torso into Uttanasana. Then inhale, arch your torso into a slight backbend with the fingertips or palms pressed to the floor or blocks, and exhale while bringing your left foot back into a lunge. Inhale forward to Plank, then exhale and lower yourself into Chaturanga Dandasana. On an inhalation, arch your torso up as you straighten your arms into Upward Dog. Exhale back to Downward Dog; step the left foot forward on an inhalation into Lunge. Swing the right leg forward to Uttanasana on an exhalation, then lift your torso and reach your arms overhead on an inhalation to Urdhva Hastasana. Finally, lower your arms on an exhalation and return to your starting point, Tadasana.

Remember, this is only a half-round; you'll need to repeat the sequence, switching left to right and right to left to complete a full round. If you're just starting out, it might help to work on the poses individually before you put them together

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Many of the variations of Sun Salutation begin in Tadasana with the sacred hand gesture mentioned earlier. Most students know it as Anjali Mudra (Reverence Seal), but—in honor of the ancient yogis—I like to call it by one of its other names, Hridaya Mudra (Heart Seal). Touch your palms and fingers together in front of your chest and rest your thumbs lightly on your sternum, with the sides of the thumbs pressing lightly on the bone about two-thirds of the way down. Be sure to broaden your palms and press them against each other evenly, so your dominant hand doesn't overpower its nondominant mate. The pressing and spreading of the palms helps to firm the scapulas against, and spread them across, your back torso.

Since the sequence is, in essence, a humble adoration of the light and insight of the self, it's essential to practice Sun Salutation in a spirit of devotion and with your awareness turned always inward toward the heart. Make each movement as mindful and precise as possible, especially as you near the end of your rounds, when fatigue can lead to sloppiness.

Deepening the Practice

The sequence itself is fairly straightforward, but beginning students often stumble in two parts of it. The first of these is Chaturanga Dandasana: Lowering from Plank, students who lack sufficient strength in the arms, legs, and lower belly commonly wind up in a heap on the floor. The short-term solution is simply to bend the knees to the floor just after Plank, then lower the torso down so that the chest and chin (but not the belly) lightly rest on the floor.

The second sticky part is in stepping the foot forward from Downward-Facing Dog back into Lunge. Many beginners are unable to take the full step smoothly and lightly; typically, they thump their foot heavily on the floor about halfway to the hands, then struggle to wriggle it the rest of the way forward. This is a consequence both of tight groins and a weak belly. The short-term solution is to bend the knees to the floor right after Downward Dog, step the foot forward between the hands, then straighten the back knee into Lunge.

Success with Sun Salutation, as with all aspects of yoga practice, depends on commitment and regularity. An everyday practice would be best, but you might at first aim for four times a week. If possible, don't skip more than a couple of days in a row, or you might end up back at square one.

Traditionally, Sun Salutation is best performed outdoors, facing east—the location of the rising sun, a symbol of the dawn of consciousness and jnana. This might be a perfect wake-up routine in India, where it's usually warm outside, but it's probably not feasible in Michigan in late December. Nowadays, Sun Salutation is used mostly as a preliminary warm-up for an asana session. I do 10 to 12 rounds at the start of every practice—or after a few hip and groin openers—and a few more on each equinox and solstice to acknowledge the change in the light. On days when only a quickie practice is possible, an intense 10-minute Sun Salutation and five minutes spent in Savasana (Corpse Pose) will do you just fine

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Launch your practice slowly with three to five rounds, gradually building up to 10 or 15. If this seems like a lot, remember that the traditional number of rounds is 108, which may take you more than a few weeks to work up to. You can pace the sequence briskly to generate heat and cleanse the body-mind, or more moderately to create a moving meditation.

If you're looking for a more vigorous Sun Salutation, consider the approach of the vinyasa traditions such as K. Pattabhi Jois-style Ashtanga Yoga, which uses a jumping version of Sun Salutation to link the individual poses in their fixed series.

Variations of Sun Salutation are legion, and because of the sequence's malleability, it's easy enough to cook up a few of your own. For instance, you can make things more challenging by adding one or more poses: Insert Utkatasana (Chair Pose) after Urdhva Hastasana, or from Lunge, keeping your hands on the floor, straighten the forward leg to a modified Parsvottasana (Side Stretch Pose). Let your imagination run wild and have fun.

Richard Rosen is a YJ contributing editor.

Sun Salutation (Surya Namaskar) is part of **Hatha Yoga**

(the “physical” part of Yoga).

Sun Salutation has multiple mental and **physical benefits**. In only ten minutes you can achieve a low impact workout that combines both Resistance Training (e.g. weight lifting) and Cardiovascular (“Cardio”) Training.

The fitness community accepts the fact that cardiovascular exercise has reduced benefits (e.g. fat burning ends once the cardio exercise stops). It also has disadvantages like tear and wear of joints.

Resistance Training on the other hand, has multiple benefits: increases muscle mass hence more fat burning capability, increases bone density to mention just a few. The drawback: it is painful (I know I don't like the feeling of burning in my muscles, even though I know it is good for me). Resistance training is also time consuming and it may increase blood pressure momentarily if not done properly.

A good compromise is Interval Training that consists of hard alternated with light pace cardio exercise. And this is exactly where Sun Salutation comes in. It is similar with Interval Training by combining a low impact resistance training (push-ups, squats) with cardio exercise. Even better, the benefits of Sun Salutation don't stop at the physical level: your mind benefits as well.

Regular practice of Sun Salutation **benefits your body** with:

- Increased blood oxygenation by copious lung ventilation and this is great news for your heart.
- Stretches and tones your muscles keeping them supple and flexible.
- Clears your elimination channels helping your body rid itself of toxins. This is especially good in the morning after many hours of lack of movement during sleep (the lymphatic system eliminates toxins through movement).
- Stimulates and tones your Endocrine system (especially the Thyroid, the master gland that controls all the other glands).
- Tones up the internal abdominal organs by alternate stretching, compression cycles that results in better digestion and bowel movement.
Increases spine and waist flexibility

The **mental benefits** of Sun Salutation are similar with meditation. You can look at Sun Salutation as **medi-tation** in movement. It is not random that Tai-Chi (Chinese) or Kata in Karate, have a similar focussed mind on movement approach at the core of their practice. Sun Salutation helps to:

- Increase your mental focus and concentration.
- Reduce depression, anxiety and stress by reducing key markers like Cortisol.
- Increase the quantity of “good mood” neurotransmitters like Serotonin.
- Increase mind to body coordination which is very good especially for older persons.

If done properly, twelve repetitions of Sun Salutation (six pairs of Sun Salutation starting with one leg and then the other), go a long way. It takes roughly 30-40 seconds for one complete cycle (twelve postures flowing from one to the other). Add two minutes of relaxation at the end, to allow your body implement the “reset” you just performed, and you are ready for the new day.

Ten minutes all together in the morning will help you look at the unwinding life from a different Perspective.



Sun Salutation (surya namaskar)

If you think you have no time for yoga, try and do at least one or two rounds of the Sun Salutation. You'll feel the difference.

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| <p>1. Mountain</p>  <p>Begin by standing in Mountain pose, feet about hip width apart, hands either by your sides or in prayer position. Take several deep breaths.</p> | <p>2. Hands up</p>  <p>On your next inhale, in one sweeping movement, raise your arms up overhead and gently arch back as far as feels comfortable and safe.</p> | <p>3. Head to knees</p>  <p>As you exhale, bend forward, bending the knees if necessary, and bring your hands to rest beside your feet.</p> |
| <p>4. Lunge</p>  <p>Inhale and step the right leg back</p> | <p>5. Plank</p>  <p>Exhale and step the left leg back into plank position. Hold the position and inhale.</p> | <p>6. Stick</p>  <p>Exhale and lower yourself to the floor.</p> |
| <p>7. Upward Dog</p>  <p>Inhale and stretch forward and up, bending at the waist. Use your arms to lift your torso, but only bend back as far as feels comfortable and safe. Lift your legs up so that only the tops of your feet and your hands touch the floor. It's okay to keep your arms bent at the elbow.</p> | <p>8. Downward dog</p>  <p>Exhale, lift from the hips and push back and up.</p> | <p>9. Lunge</p>  <p>Inhale and step the right foot forward.</p> |
| <p>10. Head to knees</p>  <p>Exhale, bring the left foot forward and step into head-to-knee position.</p> | <p>11. Hands up</p>  <p>Inhale and rise slowly while keeping arms extended</p> | <p>12. Mountain</p>  <p>Exhale, and in a slow, sweeping motion, lower your arms to the sides. End by bringing your hands up into prayer position. Repeat the sequence, stepping with the left leg</p> |