

# yoga journal

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## Hit a High Point in Standing Splits

Use this yoga sequence to soar into Standing Splits with ease.

ANNIE CARPENTER • JUN 6, 2013

In today's busy world, it's rare to feel as though all the disparate projects and tasks you're working on fall together into a cohesive whole. More often, most of us feel harried, frenzied, and pulled in too many directions at once. One of the great benefits of yoga practice is that it teaches you to gather your attention into a state of concentration that translates into a feeling of wholeheartedness—the feeling that all that matters is now.

The last three limbs of Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga offer a well-defined progression of concentration. You move from *dharana* (concentration) to *dhyana* (contemplation) to *samadhi* (union). Traditionally, these limbs are practiced during seated meditation, but you can experience them during your hatha practice, too. When you focus attention on your alignment, you develop concentration, or *dharana*. As you become more seasoned, you become capable of concentrating more easily for longer periods of time, which is *dhyana*, or contemplation. With even more practice, you develop the ability to hold four or five alignment points in your mind with ease. This starts to happen naturally and without strain, without the feeling that you have to harden the edges of your mind or push other things away. When you get to the point where you can let go of the technique of concentrating and where the cells of your being are all in alignment with what is happening in the present moment, you enter *samadhi*.

Just as a pianist has to repeat scales over and over again before they become second nature, you'll have to practice placing your attention on your alignment and steadying it over time. But eventually, when the mind becomes well trained, you won't need to rein it in by pushing other thoughts out. Your mind will rest in the present, able to hold all that is happening in the moment.

In each of the poses that follow, you'll focus attention on the essential physical tasks that lead up to *Urdhva Prasarita Ekapadasana* (Standing Splits). You'll hone your focus as you flow from task to task, building a safe, stable pose. Eventually you will be able to sustain your attention even as you incorporate all the actions into the final pose. When this happens, you'll experience the sweetness of the actions coalescing into a satisfying whole. This effortless state of integration is a taste of the ultimate goal of yoga.

### Before You Begin

Warm up by breathing slowly in [Adho Mukha Svanasana](#) (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) and [Supta Virasana](#) (Reclining Hero Pose). Then practice two or three rounds each of Surya Namaskar A and B ([Sun Salutations A and B](#)). Remember, it doesn't matter how far you go in any of the poses; instead, stay on the path toward effortless concentration and integration by focusing on the alignment points that are offered.

### Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch Pose)

An essential task for moving into the deep forward bend of Standing Splits is to warm up and stretch the hamstrings. Parsvottanasana will open your hamstrings while you practice keeping your hips square.

Begin in [Tadasana](#) (Mountain Pose) at the top of your mat and step your left foot a leg's distance back. Line up your heels and turn out your back foot about 30 degrees. Firm your legs and ground evenly through your feet.

With your hands on your hips, inhale and lengthen your front body; exhale and hinge from your hip joints over your front leg. Place your fingertips on the floor on either side of your front foot or on blocks. If you feel that you can move deeper into the pose, move from your hips rather than rounding your back.

Refine your alignment: Press into the outer edge of your back foot. Firm the inner knee of that leg and draw the inner thigh back to keep your hips square. Take your attention to your front leg: Press the entire ball of your front foot down—you may find your big toe needs more attention to root down. Press the top of your calf muscle forward toward your shin. Lift the kneecap to bring the quadriceps into its full action. Draw the whole leg back and up into its socket to achieve the depth of this pose. For stability, hug the tops of your thighs inward.

Use your inhalations to lengthen your torso and your exhalations to fold and settle down over the leg. After eight to 10 breaths, inhale, lengthen your spine, and come up. Practice both sides; then come back to Downward-Facing Dog for a few deep breaths.

### High Lunge

Standing Splits is an asymmetrical pose, and it's easy to compress your back on one side. To counteract this tendency, you will need to keep your lower back broad and your pelvis at a neutral tilt while you do the pose.

In High Lunge you'll practice internal rotation in your back leg to keep your lower back wide and long. And you'll stretch the front of your hips, which will give you the necessary space to tilt your pelvis into a neutral position.

From Downward-Facing Dog, step your right foot forward between your hands and rise up through your torso, staying on the ball of your back foot. Keep your back knee slightly bent, and place both hands on your hips while you refine your alignment.

Bend your front leg toward a right angle and draw your thigh deep into its socket. Lift the inner arch of your front foot and hug the top of your outer thigh in.

The alignment of your back leg is key: Staying steady on the ball of your left foot, roll your left inner thigh toward the wall behind you. You'll feel width in your lower back. Now, snake your tailbone straight down to lengthen the lower back, bringing your pelvis into a neutral tilt (think of your front hip points moving up as your tailbone moves down).

Maintain the dual action of internally rotating your back leg while your tailbone reaches downward, then push the top of your thigh back to straighten your leg. You may feel a strong stretch along the front of your hip—this stretch will help prepare you for the final pose. It doesn't matter if you achieve a fully straight leg—it's more important that you find the right degree of stretch while you maintain the alignment of your pelvis. Stretch your arms up and breathe fully. Keep moving the tops of your thighs toward your hamstrings: straight down in your front leg, and back in the back leg. After five deep breaths, exhale and bring your hands to the mat, stepping back into Downward-Facing Dog between sides.

### Virabhadrasana III (Warrior Pose III)

In Warrior Pose III, you'll focus on engaging your standing foot and your inner thigh muscles to help you balance on one leg. Once you've built a solid foundation in this pose, it will become easier to lift the leg into Standing Splits.

Come into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend). Inhale, come onto your fingertips, and lengthen your torso forward. Shift your weight onto your right foot, and lift your left leg up to hip height.

Focus on your standing-leg alignment: Spread the toes of your right foot and ground all four corners. Gently press your top calf forward as you did in Parsvottanasana, and keep your kneecap lifting to firm your leg. Lift your inner arch and feel as though you have a zipper along your inner leg. From the lift of the arch, zip all the way up to the inner thigh while you hug the top of your outer thigh in.

Bring attention to the lifted leg. To keep it at hip height, press the top thigh up toward your hamstring. Roll your inner thigh up as you did in High Lunge to help keep your lower back wide.

To put the whole pose together, press your lifted heel toward the wall behind you. Gently lift your abdominal wall to support your lower back, especially on your left side. Then lengthen all the way out through the crown of your head. If you feel steady, lift your hands off the floor and stretch your arms alongside your ears. Take a couple of long breaths and return to Uttanasana between sides.

### Three-Legged Downward-Facing Dog Pose

Come to Downward-Facing Dog with your heels at a wall. (If your hamstrings are tight, come to the balls of your feet with your heels up the wall a bit.) Firm your arms and press your hands steadily onto the floor, creating length through your spine and up and out through your hips. Drive your thighs and heels back toward the wall, but allow the tops of your calves to move forward very slightly, as if you were starting to bend your knees.

Inhaling, bend both legs and slide the ball of your left foot up the wall. Once again, use your alignment to keep your lower back broad and long. Keep the whole leg neutral and your buttocks as relaxed as possible. Press the ball of your left foot into the wall to help you engage and stretch your hip flexors. Move the top of your left thigh toward the wall and try to straighten the leg fully. You may find that your left hip wants to lift and roll open; resist this and roll your inner thigh toward the ceiling.

Now, turn your attention to your right leg. See if you can straighten it by grounding your heel toward the floor and pressing the top of your thigh back toward the wall. If you can, walk your hands back toward the wall a few inches and move your attention steadily through all the tasks again. When you feel ready, walk your hands out, lower your leg back to Downward-Facing Dog, and rest in [Balasana](#) (Child's Pose) before you repeat the pose on the second side.

## Urdhva Prasarita Ekapadasana (Standing Splits)

Begin by folding forward in Uttanasana. Ground your feet and press your calves gently forward as you press your top thighs back. Inhale, lengthen your spine, and come onto your fingertips. Shift your weight onto your right foot and inhale again, lifting your left leg as you did in Virabhadrasana III. Roll your left inner thigh up as you reach your heel back.

Ground into your right foot and press your calf forward while you keep the top of your thigh moving back. These actions will create a slight bend in your right leg. Lift the inner arch of your right foot and hug that top thigh in as you press it back. Try to lift your left leg higher now by steadily sending the top of the thigh up into the hamstring.

Begin to firm your standing leg by lifting the kneecap until your leg is as straight as you can get it for now. Take a full inhalation, extending from your belly out to the crown of your head. Then, exhaling, fold your torso over your right leg. Walk your hands back to either side of your right foot. Keep pressing your left fingertips down onto the mat; if you can, wrap your right hand around your right ankle. Imagine your breath drawing your standing leg up and expanding all the way to your left toes. Steady your gaze on the floor and sense all of the subtle actions coalescing into a sweet, expansive pose. Lower the leg to Uttanasana for a few breaths and then do your second side.

When you've completed this challenging series, come into Malasana (Garland Pose), sitting on a block if you'd like. Pause here for several breaths and sense the residue of having fully expanded your body and focused your mind. Then lie back and move into an easy, reclined twist on each side before you surrender into a long [Savasana](#) (Corpse Pose).

**Annie Carpenter teaches SmartFLOW yoga at Exhale Center for Sacred Movement in Venice, California. She also teaches and shares her passion for yoga around the world.**

