

# BACK TO BASICS

PURE YOGA  
NEEDS AN  
INTENSE  
COMMITMENT  
IN TERMS OF  
PRACTICE

by Shameem Akthar



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Both as a yoga teacher and as a practitioner, the most difficult urge to control is the need to recklessly experiment with new practices. My asana guru, Prahlada, advised me that as a yoga teacher it was important for me to impart the idea that perfection in the basic poses was essential before advancing to higher practices. As I grow in my own sadhana I realise the wisdom of this.

The problem of teaching in a city like Mumbai is that people expect everything to entertain them, including yoga. While I too believe that our engagements in life need that spark of recreational value, I also find that like high art, pure yoga needs an intense commitment in terms of practice. Unless you can bend forward to touch your toes with your fingers in a seated forward bend – which is a basic pose really – what value do you gain in trying out fifteen versions of this? More damagingly, each of the advanced versions, done lackadaisically or without the right alignment, can defer your growth in the basic forward bend. So, what is that urge that makes one want to try something new in yoga without having perfected the basics? Prahlada says this is the ‘monkey mind’ at its tricks again, and must be curbed.

This does not mean you do not experiment. But that you first prepare for it through a dedicated practice of all that you know. For instance, in the Sivananda yoga tradition, we advance into the headstand variation only after we learn to hold the basic pose at least for three minutes, without any support. This is crucial, even if in terms of teaching your muscles the delicate co-ordination in that basic pose. To jump into other variations without the power to stay up is not only dangerous, but also foolhardy.

Some practitioners continue for years without trying to reach deeper in the classic, basic poses. Take the simple padmasana or lotus pose, for instance. Most advanced yoga vari-

ations revolve around it. Yet, some students will keep saying, ‘I can never do the lotus.’ The block in practice starts with that word ‘never’. In yoga, there is nothing permanent, including your frailties. Part of why we do yoga is to wean ourselves from such infirmities of the body first. Then the soul. So I firmly believe the flaw is not in their body, but their mind, that they do not attempt it or try practices which will get them into it. Instead of it, they scrunch and torture through other practices, earning some feel-good value that does not translate into real growth – be it of the body or the mind. Possibly we need to try different things because we cannot do the few things we know well enough.

The first stage in true yoga practice is a perfection of basic poses, including headstand and the lotus. If you have a few pranayama practices ensuring regularity in terms of daily practice, that is high achievement. Attempting new practices, especially pranayama practices, to relieve boredom on the mat, will be counterproductive, even in terms of health.

## Udarakarshanasana (Abdominal twist pose):

This is a basic level pose. But it helps you reach the lotus by making the subtle muscle tissue open up and clear the nadis.

Sit on your heels, with knees on the ground in front of you. Place left hand on your right knee. Place right hand behind your back, palm facing out. Inhale. Exhaling press down left hand on the right knee and twist from the abdomen, to look over your right shoulder. Continue normal breathing. Hold the pose for a few seconds. Release. Rest and repeat for left side.

**Benefits:** Helps with fat loss. Prepares you for advanced practices, including the lotus. Tones waist. Makes the spine flexible. ☺

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