



## YOGA FOR SWIMMERS

# YOGA FOR BACKSTROKERS

## Techniques to increase awareness and posture

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### Backstroke

A swimming stroke performed on the back with the arms lifted alternately out of the water in a backward circular motion and the legs extended and kicking.

This is the only stroke in which you are "turned over," or "upside down." We don't usually walk or run backwards, it takes practice to be relaxed in our bodies when we can't see where we are going. It requires trust to allow ourselves into 'reverse' positions... but once mastered, they work excellently at balancing the body's musculature, and energy flow, therefore the practice outlined in this article will deal with backbends and inversions concentrating on the placement of the shoulders for optimum stability, strength, and flexibility. The result will make you feel more power, energy, and focus, and give you the ability to draw on your core strength rather than merely using arms and legs to propel your body. But first, please take the time to do these three simple exercises; I will come back to them during the practice.

### Simple exercise # 1

Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position; close your eyes and breath into your chest. Do this for a few breaths and note what it feels like. Now, change your breath to be in the back of your body. Work in partners sitting back-to-back, feeling the other person's breath in your back, or work against a wall. As you breath in, expand the back body; as you breath out, let the air move from the back to the front and then out. What's the difference?

### Simple exercise # 2

Take your hands to a wall shoulder distance apart and at shoulder height. Push into the wall with your hands and your shoulders as hard as you can for a few seconds. Now keep pushing your hands into the wall but pull your shoulders back and towards each other on your spine. Which one feels stronger? Which one feels like you are using all the muscles in your arms instead of just the shoulders?

### Simple exercise # 3

Lie down on your back with your knees up towards the ceiling, feet into the floor, feet hip-distance apart. Push the back of your head into the floor using the front neck muscles. Notice how your chin tucks towards your chest and the shoulders round. Now push the back of your head into the floor using the back neck muscles, creating the natural

curve in the back of your neck, chin straight up towards the ceiling. Which one feels stronger?

### Losing energy

When loosing energy in backstroke, the tendency is to sink in the hips, which gives the effect of sitting in the water instead of keeping streamlined. Also, when tired, the tendency is to lift the head, taking your chin towards the collarbone. This might give you a feeling of strength, but the opposite is true. When you bring your chin towards your chest, you are actually loosing alignment and using pure muscular strength. It is harder to propel yourself through the water this way.

The shoulders tire easily and tend to be injured from overuse. This is because the shoulders are extending out instead of pulled in; this does feel more powerful, but actually keeping them contained with the rest of the spine will give you a stronger base to work from.

### Be in the back

Being in the back of your body is a more omnipresent or all-embracing place to be, as the front body tends to be more solipsistic and separate. Why fight against nature? Why not, instead, move with the flow, let your body keep its natural alignment and be light and fluid until the end.

### Honesty

The Asanas in this series are challenging and it can often take quite a while to find the full essence of the pose. Instead of approaching these poses with an athletic muscular integrity, try to approach them with lightness and a sense of play, and you might find the challenge enjoyable. It doesn't matter if you achieve the final stage of any pose; what matters is being true to yourself and expressing yourself to the fullest at every stage of the practice. This also includes moving in or out of a posture/asana. It is imperative to keep mindful during transitions, much like it is imperative to be just as active and present during your turns at either end of the pool as it is during the race. If you experience pain or discomfort while practising, ask yourself if this is from strengthening and stretching or if it is an inappropriate sharp pain. If it is the latter, stop, refocus, and start again. If this pain persists, it would be best to seek out a yoga practitioner to take you through the practice.

### First

I suggest reading over the first two articles of this series: "Learning About Yoga" and "Essentials of

Yoga" to refresh your mind of the basics. Referring back to these articles, start in SUKHASANA, a comfortable cross-legged seated position. Close your eyes, ease your mind, soften and deepen your breath, and give your self a positive goal or desire that you wish to achieve in your practice today.

- When you are ready, open your eyes and come into TADASANA (Mountain Pose).
- Follow through series one, two, and three of the warm-up from "Essentials of Yoga" and finish in ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (downward facing dog). Then come back to TADASANA.

If the articles are not available to you, I suggest warming up before jumping into this practice. Spend at least 20 to 25 minutes doing a basic warm-up in which you create some heat in your body, and loosen and limber your muscles and joints.

### The practice

Through these first three postures, always keep your face up towards the ceiling: *do not turn your head from side to side, this will put unwanted pressure on your neck*



**HALASANA (HALA - plow)**

- Lie on your back, knees facing up to the ceiling, feet into the floor.
- Exhale; use your stomach muscles to bring your knees into your chest; place your arms down by your sides, palms firmly into the floor.
- Inhale; using your arms as leverage, gently roll your hips up towards the ceiling, letting your legs come overhead, toes into the floor.
- Exhale; inner rotate your thighs, letting your buttocks stick out, creating a curve in your lumbar spine.
- Inhale; scoop your tailbone as you take your sitting bones towards the ceiling.
- Legs are active and straight, feet flexed.
- Gently push into the back of your head, to create the natural curve in your cervical spine. Your chin should be moving towards the ceiling, not into your chest. As in *simple exercise # 3*, use the back neck muscles, not the front neck muscles.
- If you cannot keep the neck off the floor, fold a towel and place it in line with your shoulders.
- Stay here for 5 deep even breaths. As you inhale, let the back of your body expand; as you exhale, let the breath come into the front of the body.



**SALAMBA SARVANGASANA (SALAMBA – supported, SARVANGA – all parts of the body)**



- From HALASANA:
- Exhale; clasp your hands behind your back, coming more onto your shoulders. Take the clasped hands to the floor.

*If your hands do not reach the floor while they are clasped, do not go into SALAMBA SARVANGASANA or EKA*

*PADA SARVANGASANA, stay in HALASANA for 5 more deep even breaths concentrating on softening the shoulders, lengthening through the torso and keeping the feet flexed and together.*

- If your hands do reach the floor:
- Exhale; take your hands to your lower back, palms facing towards the ceiling, elbows in line with the shoulders.
- Inhale; bend the knees so your thighs are parallel to the floor, bottom of the feet facing towards the ceiling. Keep the inner thighs working and the inner feet glued together.
- Exhale; straighten the legs up to the ceiling.
- Work with the idea that you are actually standing on the floor with your hands on your back, looking at your toes; your body should be as vertical as possible.
- Stay here for 5 deep, even breaths. As you inhale, feel the breath move into your hands, (*simple exercise #1*); as you exhale, keep the expansion in your back ribs and let the breath flow into the front of the body.

**EKA PADA SARVANGASANA (EKA-PADA - one leg)**



- From SALAMBA SARVANGASANA:
- Inhale; feeling the extension from the core of the pelvis, press your right foot up towards the ceiling as if it was standing on the floor.
- Exhale; keeping the

left leg straight, bring it down towards the floor. Keep both feet parallel (don't turn out as you would in a breaststroke kick).

- Stay here for 5 deep even breaths; as you inhale, feel the breath move in the back of your body; as you exhale, extend through both legs.
- Inhale; keeping both legs active, bring the left leg back up to join the right.
- Stay in SALAMBA SARVANGASANA for a few breaths; make note of your alignment.
- Repeat other side.

To come out:

- Keeping the tummy firm, inhale back into HALASANA.
- Exhale; bend your knees and let them come to

either side of your ears, release the arms down to the floor behind you.

- Take as many breaths as you need to *slowly* roll down your spine vertebra-by-vertebra until you are lying on your back.
- Inhale; bring your knees to your chest and give yourself a hug.
- Exhale; roll to one side and *slowly* come up to sitting with your head coming up last.

**PARIVRTTA ANJANEYASANA (PARIVRTTA - revolved, ANJANA mother of Hanuman, a chief of great strength)**



- From TADASANA (mountain pose):
- Inhale; bring the arms above the head: URDHA HASTASANA.
- Exhale; fold forward: UTTANASANA.
- Inhale; Press the fingertips into the floor and lift the torso: ARDHA

UTTANASANA.

(These four asanas are described in detail in "Essentials Of Yoga," SwimNews May-June 2006.)

- Exhale; bend the knees, take the left foot back, left knee to the floor, right knee directly over the right ankle. Feet are facing front, left toe mounds into the floor, heel up.
- Inhale; lift your torso up, take your hands to the right thigh.
- Exhale; inner rotate the thighs and stick your buttocks out behind you.
- Inhale; scoop your tailbone, keep the tummy firm, bring the left foot up and reach back to clasp the foot with your right hand.
- Exhale; lunge forward from the bottom of your left thigh.
- Inhale; Lengthen through your torso, take the left hand to the floor to the inside of the right foot.
- Exhale; twist from the lower left back, open your chest to the right, keeping your hips facing forward.

(If you cannot reach back and clasp your foot with your hand, take a towel around the foot and hold on to the towel)

- Stay here for 5 deep even breaths. As you inhale, feel the breath moving in the back of your body; as you exhale, deepen the twist and the lunge.

To come out:

- Inhale; bring your torso to face front.
- Exhale; *gently* release your back foot to the floor, bring your hands to either side of your front foot.
- Inhale; straighten the left leg, toe mounds into the floor, looking slightly in front of you, bring the left foot to join the right.
- Exhale: UTTANASANA
- Inhale: TADASANA.
- Repeat other side.

**DHANURASANA (DHANURA – a bow)**



- Lie down on your stomach, arms alongside your body, palms facing up.
- Inhale; press the tops

of all 10 toes into the floor, inner rotate your thighs and let your buttocks come up.

- Exhale; scoop the tailbone, reach back and hold onto your ankles with your hands.
- Inhale; move your shins away from your body, open your chest to the front of the room. Keep your thighs on the floor while trying to get your lower legs perpendicular to the floor.
- Exhale (*simple exercise #2*), bring the shoulder back in towards the spine as you hold onto the ankles with your arm muscles.
- Stay here for 5 deep even breaths. As you inhale, feel the breath expanding the back of your body; as you exhale, keeping the tailbone scooped, move your chest towards the front of the room.

To come out:

- Inhale and slowly release your legs, torso, and arms back to the floor.
- Repeat this posture three times; always move with your breath.

The next 3 postures can be done in sequence, or rest between. Remember to let yourself have fun. The important thing is to find the essence of the pose for yourself, not to complete the full pose as it is in the picture. If you find the next 3 poses too challenging, follow through the same steps but instead of placing your hands at either side of your head, clasp your hands underneath your body as in SALAMBA SARVANGASANA preparation.

**URDHVA DAHANURASANA (URDHVA – upward)**



- Lie on your back, knees up towards the ceiling, feet into the floor.
- Feet are parallel, hip-distance apart, a palm's-length away from your buttocks.

- Take the hands into the floor to either side of your ears, elbows up to the ceiling, palms facing back.

- Inhale; spread your toes wide and root the four points of each foot into the floor (big toe mound, little toe mound, inner and outer heel); setting your feet properly will engage your leg muscles.
- Exhale; inner rotate your thighs and let your buttocks stick out to create the natural curve in your lumbar spine.

- Inhale; using the back neck muscles, press the back of your head into the floor; move the shoulders in towards the spine.
- Exhale; scoop the tailbone; keeping the curve in your low back, lift your hips up as you press into your hands to come to the top of your head.
- Inhale; press into your hands, lift your head off the floor, keep your eyes focused on the floor



between your hands.

- Stay here for 5 deep, even breaths. Make sure your feet stay parallel and grounded. Inhale into the back of your body; exhale, open your chest to the front of the room.
- Experiment with SIMPLE EXERCISE #2—press into the floor with the shoulders extended out, then try the opposite, bring the shoulders back towards the spine. Which one gives you more freedom?

To come out:

- Inhale; gently lower yourself back to the floor.
- SIMPLE TWIST:
- Exhale; bring your arms out to the sides at shoulder height.
- Inhale; bring your knees into your chest.
- Exhale; take the knees to the left while looking at your right hand.
- Inhale; knees back to centre.
- Exhale; take the knees to the right while looking at your left hand.
- Inhale; back to centre.
- Roll onto one side, and gently come up to sitting with your head coming up last.

### EKA PADA URDHVA DAHANURASANA

(EKA PADA – one leg)



- Follow through all the steps of URDHVA DAHANURASANA.
- Inhale; bring the right knee in towards your chest.
- Exhale; straighten the right leg up towards the ceiling, keeping the foot flexed.
- Stay here for 5 deep, even breaths. As you inhale, feel like you are pulling your

legs together without moving them. As you exhale, root the standing foot into the floor and feel as if the top foot is standing on the ceiling.

To come out:

- Exhale the knee back into the chest.
- Inhale the foot back to the floor.
- Repeat other side.
- Inhale; gently lower yourself back to the floor
- Follow through the simple twist described after the previous asana.

### EKA HASTA URDHVA DAHANURASANA (EKA



- HASTA – one hand)
- From URDHVA DAHANURASANA.
  - Inhale; bring your right hand up towards the ceiling.
  - Exhale; soften the right shoulder in towards your

spine and take the right hand to the top of the right thigh.

(If you want a challenge here, try doing a push-up with your left arm.)

- Stay here for 5 deep, even breaths; inhale into the back of your body; exhale, soften the shoulders towards the spine, opening your chest.

- Inhale; place the right hand back on the floor.
- Repeat other side.

To come out:

- Follow through the steps described earlier.

### ADHO MUKHA VRKSASANA (ADHO MUKHA – face down, VRKSA – tree)



- Stand a few feet away from the wall.
- Place your hands about 4 inches away from the wall, shoulder distance apart, so you are in a short downward dog position. (ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA, “Essentials of Yoga”)
- Creases of the wrists facing the wall, fingers spread wide.
- Keeping the arms straight and strong, come up onto the toes and walk your feet forward until your hips are over your shoulders, shoulders over the

elbows, elbows over the wrists.

- Inhale; bring one leg up behind you, keeping it engaged by flexing the foot. Try not to turn the leg out; keep the toes pointing towards the floor.
- Look down at your hands.
- Exhale; bend the standing leg, kick the top leg into the wall and follow with the standing leg.
- Keep the arms straight and the tummy firm; imagine that you are standing on the ceiling with your arms above your head.
- Bring the inner feet together.
- Experiment with your balance by bringing one foot off the wall and then the other.
- Stay for 5 deep, even breaths; inhale the breath into the back of your body; exhale, reach the top half of your body towards the floor and the bottom half towards the ceiling.

To come out:

- Inhale; keeping the arms straight and the tummy firm, softly bring one leg down, then the other.
- If you feel dizzy, rest with your head on the floor for a few breaths..

### PINCA MAYURASANA (PINCA – tall feather, MAYURA – peacock)



- Come onto your hands and knees facing the wall.
- Take the forearms down to the floor, perpendicular to the wall, hands about 4 inches away from the wall, creases of the wrist straight forward, shoulder over the elbows.
- Spread the fingers wide to engage the arm muscles.
- Inhale; keeping the forearms parallel to each other, come onto the toe mounds.
- Exhale; lift the hips up, you are in a short downward dog again,

but this time your forearms are on the floor.

- Inhale; walk the feet forward until your hips are over your shoulders, shoulders over the elbows.

- Do not let the elbows wing out to the side. If this is happening, take a pull-buoy to the wall between your hands; make an L with your first finger and thumb, around the outer edges of the pull-buoy. This will give you leverage to keep the elbows in.
- Look up, slightly in front of your hands.
- Exhale; soften the shoulders towards the spine.
- Inhale; bring one leg up behind you, keep the foot flexed and the toes pointing towards the floor.
- Exhale; bend the standing leg, kick the top leg into the wall and follow with the standing leg.
- Bring the inner feet together; keep the tummy firm, the thighs working.
- Stay here for 5 deep, even breaths. Inhale into the back of your body; exhale, let the lower half of your body rise towards the ceiling and the upper half of your body root into the floor.

To come out:

- Inhale; keeping your gaze in front of you, softly bring one leg down, then the other.
- Come to rest with your head on the floor for a few breaths.

### To Finish

Follow through the cool down from “Essentials of Yoga”: TWIST, DANDASANA, PASCIMOTTANASANA, and SAVASANA.

Then come into a comfortable cross-legged seated position; once again, find the breath in the back of your body. Close your eyes and let yourself reflect on the experience you just had.

### To Follow

When you are training, doing a set of backstroke, reflect on this yoga sequence. See if you can feel the breath in the back of your body, feel the difference between extending the shoulders out versus keeping them in, and feel which neck muscles you use more frequently. Experience the postures within your stroke.

Next time you are walking down a road, try walking backwards, blind for a few steps. Notice how you tense up and shift your body posture. Now apply the new awareness you have attained from this practice to realigning your body, find the breath in the back. Pause for a moment and visualize yourself in the water; with this improved alignment, anything is possible!

Namaste. ■

*Soo Garay* teaches yoga at Yogaspace, www.yogaspace.net. She is also available for private consultation and team training. Please contact Nick Thierry at swimnews@swimnews.com for more information.

Photos: *Michael Proudfoot*

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