

drawn inside

Your mind and senses pull inward when you experiment with tortoiselike patience in Kurmasana.

Ancient sages frequently named asanas after shapes or qualities that they observed in nature. Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose) is named for an animal that withdraws into its shell when startled or threatened. It's not surprising, then, that when you take the physical shape of the tortoise in this pose, you will often experience an exquisite feeling of moving inward mentally—as though the world around you is moving out of focus as your inner world becomes more audible and clear.

When your attention moves inward like this, you experience *pratyahara*, or sense withdrawal, which is the fifth of the eight limbs of classical yoga that Patanjali describes in the Yoga Sutra.

Pratyahara is the threshold to your inner world. Your mind becomes less reactive to the swirling distractions of the world around you, and as a result, you feel quiet and centered. Like the tortoise, you experience pratyahara in this pose by drawing the limbs of your perception—your eyes, ears, skin, nose, mouth, and consequently your mind—into the shell of the limitless landscape within you.

When you first start practicing Kurmasana, **quiet centeredness can prove** challenging—the pose requires pinning the arms and legs down to the earth and curving the back like a shell. You may face resistance, feel stuck or fearful, and perhaps even wonder why some yoga students seem ➤



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1 Malasana (Garland Pose)

Begin in Tadasana. Bend both knees and release the pelvis into a squat. Lean forward slightly and place your hands on a wall or on the floor. If your heels come off the floor, slide a blanket beneath them. To help widen your lower back and release the hip joints, use your feet and isometrically spread the inner heels away from each other. Notice how the back muscles widen with this leg action. Exhale deeply to soften your back muscles, and release the grip from your jaw and hips.



2 Marichyasana I

Sit in Dandasana. Bend your right knee and place your heel against your inner left thigh. Inhale, lift your arms up, and exhale, lengthening forward over your left leg. Sweep your right arm around your right shin and wrap your left arm behind you. Clasp your left wrist with your right hand. Press your right arm against the shin and reach back through both arms to extend and free the bottom ribs up off the abdomen. Breathe evenly and quietly. Learning to release tension around the eyes and jaw will encourage you to feel, reflect, and accept the sensations that tell you when to back off and when to move deeper. Come back to Dandasana before taking the second side.



3 Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose)

From Dandasana, bring the soles of your feet together and release your legs toward the floor. To isolate movement in the hip sockets, anchor your sitting bones down, lengthen your inner thighs toward your inner knees and press your heels against each other. Press the back of your thighs and shins toward the floor and extend your spine forward. Lift your pubic bone toward the navel to widen your lower back. Rest your head on the floor or a block. Eventually, you may even rest your chin on the floor.





4 Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend)

Begin in Dandasana and spread your legs wide. Press the entire length of each leg down. Squeeze the outer hips in toward the buttocks to stabilize your pelvis and fold forward. Either support your torso with a bolster or continue to fold and clasp your big toes. Do not allow your thighs to roll in or out. Inhale and lift your pubis, navel, diaphragm, and sternum up. Exhale and fold forward toward the floor. Observe sensations as they arise with a quiet, neutral, and objective mind, so that you know, on and off the mat, when to wait and when to act.



5 Kurmasana (Tortoise Pose)

Sit in Dandasana with your legs slightly wider apart than your hips. Bend both knees, hinge forward slightly, and slide your arms one at a time beneath your knees. Reach your arms out and slowly slide the heels forward on the floor. Lift your pubic bone toward the navel as you lengthen your torso forward, eventually pinning your arms beneath your legs. With your physical body contained, practice shifting the sense organs inward. When you practice taming and training your senses, you invite a quiet mind that enables you to reunite with the expansive true nature of consciousness.

(benefits)

- Strengthens the back
- Tones the abdominal organs
- Encourages flexibility in the hips
- Quiets the mind

(contraindications)

- Menstruation or pregnancy
- Herniated disks
- Strained lower-back muscles

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➤ to find it easy. Practice watching the alignment of your mind as much as that of your body, encouraging equanimity in order to maintain your vigor.

Instead of reacting to and identifying with the resistance that may come up, sequence your actions this way: First move, then feel, and then reflect on the sensations. This gives you time to perceive and respond appropriately to cues your body gives you.

Take note of what the ancients called the “portals”: eyes, mouth, nostrils, and even ears. If these areas feel tense, encourage them to soften. When the portals are relaxed and the sensory channels are calm, you train your senses and mind to remain reflective and neutral rather than reactive. And when you develop the ability to stay neutral in the face of difficulty, you can assess your choices and respond to any situation with insight and conscious action rather than from emotional reactivity. In literature and mythology, tortoises and turtles are often depicted as patient and even-tempered creatures—who could forget “The Tortoise and the Hare”? As you work through this challenging sequence, try to emulate their serenity and fortitude. You’ll notice a resounding benefit when you face difficult situations both on and off the mat.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

To warm up and release the hips, thighs, and back body for the following sequence, take 8 to 12 breaths in Utkatasana (Chair Pose), Garudasana (Eagle Pose), Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose), and Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose), taking asymmetrical poses on both sides before moving on to the next pose.

MALASANA (Garland Pose)



As the weight of your pelvis brings you deeper into Malasana, you’ll feel a beautiful

passive opening in your hips and in the muscles of your back. You’ll need this opening in order to fold deeply enough to reach your arms under your legs in Kurmasana. Remember to move patiently into the pose, take time to feel, and then reflect on each sensation to guide you into your next movement.

Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) and touch the inner edges of your feet together. Bend both knees and lower your pelvis toward your heels. Spread your knees apart just enough to release the pelvis toward your feet into a squat, and lean forward to counterbalance the weight of your hips. If your heels lift off the floor, slide a folded blanket beneath them so that you can press the inner heels down. Release your tailbone toward the floor and stretch your arms forward between your knees. Place your hands on a wall for support or, if you can release deeply enough, rest your hands on the floor.

Spread your inner heels away from each other, as if you were stretching the mat. This isometric action helps your inner thighs release in toward the side ribs. It will also facilitate the engagement of your outer hips and the widening of your inner back thighs. Widening the area around the hamstring muscles releases them, which allows the pelvis to move more freely. Notice how the back muscles also widen with this leg action. You’ll use this movement again in Kurmasana.

Keep your heels anchored, lower your head toward the floor, and start to wrap your arms around your shins. If you feel a great deal of resistance, you may want to stay with your hands at the wall or on the floor in front of you. If you release deeply enough, you may have the space to clasp your ankles. Press your upper arms against your shins to spread the upper back muscles as you press the inner heels down to widen the lower back. Release the shoulder blades away from your ears. Ground your heels firmly as you balance your weight evenly on your feet so that you do not sit down on the floor.

You may eventually release deeply enough that you can wrap your arms around your legs and clasp your hands behind your sacrum, like a garland adorning

the body. This requires very supple hips, loose shoulders, and flexible back muscles. (All the postures in this sequence encourage flexibility in these joints.) But if you find yourself overreaching into the bind, consider holding your ankles in the simpler variation.

Wherever you are in the pose, maintain a feeling of softness in your sensory organs and a quiet, reflective quality to your mind. Take it slow. Listen with your muscles and feel how the smallest action can affect the entire body. Even as your hips grip, relax your inner groins toward the floor so that your pelvis can release. Look for the sweet spot where you are able to maintain a soft breath.

Can you maintain a neutral mind and accept your unique abilities, independent of how others might practice the pose? Malasana can be intense. Start by holding for a minute or less. Then, release your buttocks onto the floor and extend your legs forward into Dandasana (Staff Pose). If you're sitting on the backs of your sitting bones and your lower back is rounding, sit up on folded blankets to bring your pelvis into a neutral position.

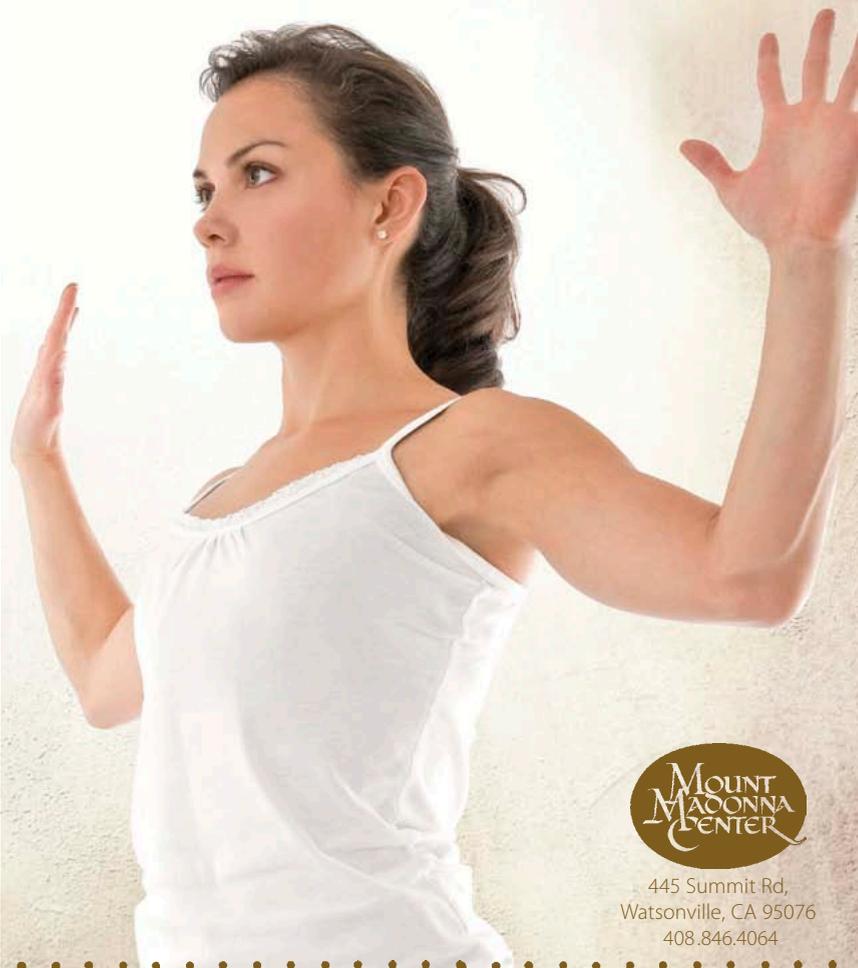
MARICHYASANA I



Marichyasana I also develops flexibility in your hips and back muscles, and in addition, stretches your hamstrings. It's more active than Malasana, offering the opportunity to work under slightly more challenging circumstances. Similar to a petulant puppy in training, your hips and your senses will learn to yield with practice, time, and perseverance.

From Dandasana, bend the right knee in toward your chest and place your foot flat on the floor, close to the perineum. Press the middle seam of the left leg, from the hip to the heel, down toward the floor. The right sitting bone will lift slightly. On an inhalation, extend your arms overhead to elongate your spine and stretch out the

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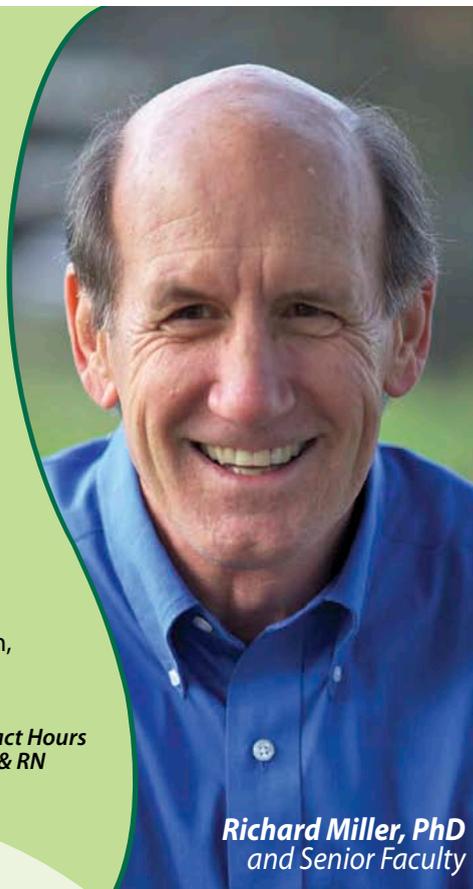


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torso. Then, on an exhalation, lengthen your torso forward over the left leg.

As you lengthen forward, release the right leg slightly away from the torso and turn the right side of the abdomen toward the left leg so that both sides of the lower belly can lengthen freely. Notice how your back, hips, and left leg respond. Hold the left foot with both hands. If this causes strain, loop a belt around the left foot and hold on to the belt with both hands.

Press the inner edge of the right heel down to bring the right thigh back alongside the torso. Lengthen your torso over the left leg and roll your right shoulder in and down toward the floor. Release your right hand from the belt or the left foot and sweep your right arm close to the floor and around the right shin.

Then, reach your left arm behind you and hold the left wrist with the right hand. (Alternatively, you can clasp the belt with both hands.) Roll the inner arms toward the outer arms into external rotation, and then draw your shoulders back. Stretch your arms behind you as you reach forward with the chest. Lift the bottom of your sternum toward your chin to lengthen the front of your torso.

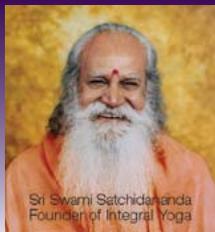
Hold for one to two minutes as you extend both sides of the waist evenly, rolling the right side of the navel toward the left and then forward. Press the right arm against the right leg as you did in Malasana, and use your breath to help you gauge the length of your waist. On an inhalation, lift your chest off the waist. On a deep exhalation, connect more directly to the base of your abdomen. Release to Dandasana before taking the second side.

BADDHA KONASANA (Bound Angle Pose)



Baddha Konasana is a deep stretch for the hips and back muscles that will prepare you to fold your torso forward in Kurmasana. From Dandasana, press the soles of

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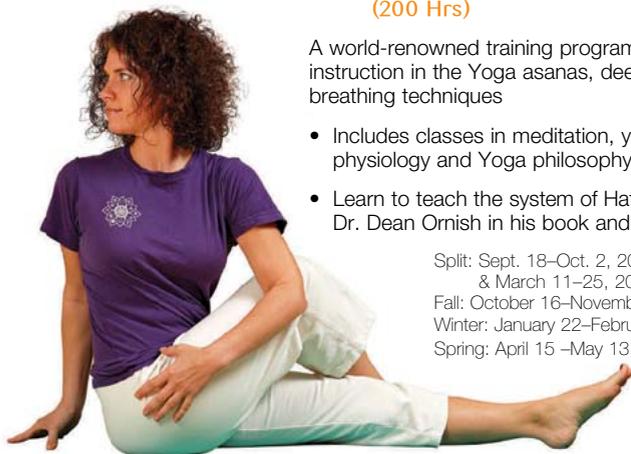
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your feet together as you bend your knees, releasing your legs out to the side. If your knees are much higher than your hips, sit up on the support of folded blankets.

Touch the outer edges of the feet together and open the inner edges toward your face, as if you were reading a book. This preparatory phase encourages external rotation in the hip sockets and a release in the inner groins. Keep the entire spine of the book—the outer edge of the feet—intact, especially the outer heels, and work the soles of the feet to face the ceiling. As you spread the skin on the soles of the feet open, simultaneously lengthen from the inner groin toward your inner knee. Then, maintain the length of the inner thighs and slowly press the soles of the feet back to touch each other, as if the soles were saying *namaste*.

Interlace your hands around your feet. Straighten your arms and lift the torso up against the pull of the arms to lengthen your abdomen and the full length of your spine. Press the thighs and shins down toward the floor as you begin to bend forward. Go slowly, and as you move, watch to see if you have space to fold deeper or if you feel stuck. Sometimes, when you are faced with resistance, a moment of conscious breathing will let you see clearly whether it's wiser to move in deeper or to back off instead.

Place your forearms on your thighs and slide the elbows slightly toward the knees to lengthen the inner thighs and release the groins. Release the outer thighs toward the floor. If you feel that space continues to open for you to move deeper into the pose, keep releasing into the forward fold. You can rest your head on a block, or you may even rest the forehead, the nose, and perhaps eventually the chin on the floor.

Wherever you are in the pose, stay for at least a minute as you anchor the sitting bones onto the floor. The grounded sitting bones give you a firm base from which to extend the bottom ribs up and off the diaphragm to help you breathe more freely. Release your shoulder blades down your back and soften the neck. Then lift the torso up and extend your legs forward into Dandasana.

UPAVISTHA KONASANA (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend)



You'll get a deep stretch in your hamstrings and lower back as Upavistha Konasana brings you one step closer to Kurmasana. From Dandasana, spread your legs so that they form a wide angle. Use this preparatory phase to ensure a solid base from which you can hinge your torso forward. Press the entire back seam of each leg, from the sitting bones through the heels, firmly into the floor. Iron both legs down, as if they were heavy logs sinking into the earth.

If you're very flexible, you'll want to contain your flexibility and instead work on developing control and strength in the outer hips. From the outer knee, draw the outer thigh in toward the hip and lengthen the inner shin toward the inner heel. The outer hips should firm in toward the buttocks to stabilize the pelvis. Avoid collapsing on the inner groins. Rather, support the base of your pelvis by lifting the pubic bone and lower belly up toward the navel as you pin the outer hips in.

If you are less flexible, you may feel yourself being pulled onto the back of the sitting bones and the outer edge of the legs. If that's happening, sit up on folded blankets to elevate your hips. Widen the inner back thighs toward the outer thighs as you did in Malasana to help release the sitting bones away from each other. Draw the sacrum in toward the pubic bone and sit tall as you lengthen your spine.

On an inhalation, lift the front of the torso up as you anchor the outer edge of your buttocks down. On an exhalation, start to fold forward toward the floor. Hold for one to three minutes, moving, watching, and then responding appropriately, either coming in deeper or lifting the torso to back off. If you feel restriction in the legs or lower back, support your abdomen with a bolster. If your body continues to release into the forward fold,



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clasp your big toes. Touch the head and maybe even the chin to the floor as the torso lengthens forward.

To come out of the pose, press your legs firmly down and place your hands underneath your shoulders. Use the strength of your arms to lift your torso; then slide your hands beneath your inner knees, using your hands to bend the knees, and bring your legs together into Dandasana. If you find a lot of resistance to folding forward deeply in Upavistha Konasana, you may want to continue to practice the first four poses of this sequence and revisit Kurmasana when your back, hips, and hamstrings are feeling more receptive to the deep forward bend.

KURMASANA (*Tortoise Pose*)



Draw from the suppleness you've been cultivating in your back, hips, and legs, and release into Kurmasana instead of pulling yourself into it. Let your body emulate the softness you feel when you draw your senses inward.

From Dandasana, spread your legs a little more than the width of your shoulders. Bend your knees slightly, and lift your belly off your thighs. Lengthen your torso and fold forward. Slide one arm at a time, palms facing down, beneath the thighs and walk the palms out to the side as far as possible. Widen across your chest and release your shoulders toward the floor and away from your ears.

If you sense that you're starting to push in order to move deeper, pause and check the sensations around your eyes, mouth, ears, nose, hips, and back. Work with softening around these areas and take an honest assessment of whether you should move deeper or not. You may decide to stay right where you are, or perhaps even back out of the pose.

Wherever you are in the pose, widen the backs of your thighs and rotate your legs so that your knees and toes point

straight up. Stretch your legs out from your hips and widen your arms so that your limbs help to spread the back muscles and lengthen your front body. Use an inhalation to lengthen your sternum and chin forward. Use an exhalation to slide the heels along the floor. Touch the forehead, and perhaps someday your chin and chest, onto the floor.

If you feel stuck in this contained phase of the pose, soften the edges around your breath, your jaw, and even your expectations about how things should be. What you perceive as a stuck place can be transformed by welcoming a shift of attention. Like turning on a switch, releasing the tension in the sensory organs will quiet your mind, and you'll be better able to consider where, or even whether, to move deeper into the pose. Breathe softly, relax your face, and practice patience. Take a few gentle and skillful breaths to help you discover where you can move.

To come out of the pose, bend your knees and start to lift your torso. As you emerge, sit quietly in Dandasana. Take Bharadvajasana I (Bharadvaja's Twist I) twice as a release for any residual tension in your back. Finish your practice by taking Halasana (Plow Pose), Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand), and Salamba Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Supported Bridge Pose) on a block.

As you learn to redirect the senses, you'll be better able to establish a quiet focus while still engaging with your yoga practice and the demands of daily life. When you receive an upsetting email, have an emotional exchange, or experience a situation that creates conflict, you can learn to pause before reacting. In this way, at least for a moment, you are free from reacting to the external world around you. This persistent practice will strengthen your ability to choose what is beneficial, even if it is difficult or unwanted, as you move through your life with discriminating awareness. ❖

Lisa Walford lives and teaches in Los Angeles and is a certified Iyengar Yoga instructor. She is a founding member of the Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics Research Group. Learn more at iyengaryogatherapeutics.com.

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