

**basics**

supta padangusthasana

by Jason Crandell



Toes are spread

Arms and hands are shoulder width apart

Top leg is extended

Elbows are straight

Eyes, tongue, and jaw are soft and receptive

Back of neck is long

Shoulders are on the floor

Both hips are level with each other

# Ease into Effort

**Combining effort and surrender can seem impossible until you try Supta Padangusthasana.**

**EARLY IN YOUR PRACTICE**, you're faced with what seems to be a contradiction—as you move into unfamiliar, awkward, and difficult postures, you're asked to let go of tension in your body, mind, and breath. While you struggle to hold the pose your teacher gently reminds

you to combine effort and surrender—to be both alert and relaxed at the same time. This is an essential teaching that comes straight from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (verse II.46, to be exact). The idea is that if you can balance these qualities simultaneously while you practice, you'll create a state of internal equilibrium that you can call upon when faced with life's everyday challenges.

I'll admit, when I first started yoga, combining effort and surrender seemed laughable. Having been an ice hockey player for many years, I could not comprehend—in my body or mind—how they could coexist. Like waking and sleeping, they seemed like two distinct states, done in relationship to each other, but never at the same time—I mean, how *could* you? But I was eventually willing to entertain the concept even though, in reality, my Sun Salutations and standing poses were all effort. And when it was time for Savasana—thank God—I was *all* about relaxation.

Part of my trouble was that my body felt like it was wrapped in industrial-strength duct tape. In order to get to a place where I could relax, I had to unwind my muscles. It wasn't until I was taught Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose) that I learned to embody relaxed effort.



**DON'T** lift or hunch your shoulders off the floor.



**DON'T** lift your opposite hip in stage two of the pose.



**DO** press the bottom thigh firmly into the floor.



Bottom leg is extending vigorously



The reclined position of this pose naturally encourages a sense of surrender. It also targets your hamstrings without stressing your lower back; the floor stabilizes your back and you can adjust your strap to suit your needs.

As you ease into Supta Padangusthasana, notice how it strikes a happy medium between active and restorative work. Check in with yourself to see if you can sense alertness and relaxation melding together in an even and balanced union.

**Stage One: REINVIGORATE AND RELAX**

Lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet on the floor. Release your shoulders toward the floor and allow your eyes to settle into their sockets. Relax into the ease of this moment.

Draw your right knee toward your chest. Wrap your belt around the arch of your foot, holding one end in each hand. Slowly extend your right leg toward the ceiling, and, keeping the backs of your shoulders on the floor, straighten your arms. Make sure to keep your hands as far apart as your shoulders. The area around your heart should feel open and your neck long and relaxed.

Next, straighten your bottom leg and press your thigh toward the floor. Although your thigh won't make contact with the sticky mat, this action will anchor the pose, bringing more vitality to your legs and pelvis. As you exert effort in your legs and arms, keep your breath steady and easy.

While your bottom leg presses into the floor, extend your other leg until you create a thorough, sustainable stretch

## Pose Benefits

Promotes greater flexibility in the hips, hamstrings, and groin

Develops strength in the abdominal muscles

Prepares you for standing poses

Cools you down after backbends

Is an alternative to forward bends if you have mild lower back pain

## Contraindications

Should not be practiced by pregnant women in their 2nd or 3rd trimester

in the hamstrings. Depending on your flexibility, your top leg will be more or less vertical. If you're tight—as I was for years—you'll need to give yourself plenty of slack on the belt and move your leg farther away from your torso. Wherever you are, breathe smoothly and imagine your breath bathing your hamstrings and calves, relieving tension. As you reach your top leg up, remember to keep your bottom leg rooted into the floor.

### TWEAK YOUR TECHNIQUE

Once you've achieved the shape of the pose, you might relax so much that you fade into a partially conscious, vaguely present state. Or you might focus intensely on your top leg. Rather than zoning out or limiting your attention to the sensations in the back of your leg, keep your mind present and spread your attention throughout your body. You can encourage this attentive state by refining the pose.

First, ground the back of your bottom thigh again. To make this easier, roll the front rim of your pelvis toward your legs until your lower back arches slightly off the floor. Next, feel both legs working in tandem. As the bottom leg roots down, see if you can feel your top leg soar up. Articulate both feet, spreading across the balls of each, and feel their complex architecture awaken. Fill your body with smooth, nourishing breath.

Now that your body is fully awake, you





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can try cultivating relaxation. Keep the back of your neck long and the front of your throat soft. Relax your temples, loosen your jaw, and release your tongue. Hold the belt with just the effort needed to support the pose. Imagine the backs of your legs as lung tissue and feel the soft, smooth undulations of your breath in your hamstrings. Stay for 10 to 20 breaths.

#### Stage Two: **LENGTHEN YOUR LEGS**

The second version of Reclining Big Toe Pose cultivates suppleness in your inner legs and groin, and mimics the action of your legs in standing poses such as Triangle, Warrior II, Half Moon, and Extended Side Angle Pose. It also gives you another chance to combine alertness and relaxation because the new shape will elicit different sensations in your body.

You may be able to do the pose without the support of a block, but it's helpful to learn it with a prop. The block helps maintain evenness in your pelvis by preventing the opposite hip from lifting off the ground. When your pelvis remains stable, you're more likely to feel the stretch where it's intended—in the inner right groin.

So, slide a block, bolster, or rolled blanket underneath your outer right hip. Then slowly reach your leg out to the side until your outer thigh rests against the prop. Imagine an inseam running from your inner groin to the inside of your foot and reach your foot farther and farther away from your inner groin to increase the length of your leg. Imagine that if you wear a size 32 length pant, you're increasing it to a size 33 or even a 34. As you maintain this expansion keep your eyes, jaw, tongue, and throat soft.

Now, imagine a heavy weight on your bottom leg, and lower the back of the thigh toward the floor. If you've started to flatten your lower back and tuck your tailbone, retit the front rim of your pelvis toward your thighs until your lower back lifts off the floor. After 10 to 20 breaths, exhale and draw your right leg to vertical, coming back to stage one.

#### Stage Three: **ADD YOUR ABS**

In this phase, you'll be adding more effort. Gently firm your abdominal wall by drawing your belly toward your spine. Reach vigorously through your bottom leg as you peel your upper back and head off the floor and lift them toward your top leg. It's easier to lift your head than your torso, but don't jut your chin forward and lift your head more than your chest. Instead, lift your chest to its maximum height and keep your head directly above your shoulders.

Instead of using your arms to pull yourself closer to your leg, deepen the pose by continually rooting your bottom leg and firming your abdomen. Eventually your chest will float closer to your top leg.

This is the most difficult stage in which to meld relaxation with alertness because it requires the greatest amount of muscular work. But even when you are at the peak of your effort, focus on breathing evenly, softening your forehead, releasing your jaw, and trying not to judge yourself.

After 5 to 10 breaths, slowly release your upper back and your head to the floor. Soften your abdomen and observe the breath circulating in your belly. Savor this moment as preparation for working your other side.

#### **THE PEARL OF THE POSE**

While it's great to open and loosen the back of your legs by doing the Supta Padangusthasana series, it's even more essential to cultivate a balanced state of body and mind while you practice this posture. As you learn to combine alertness and relaxation in class, you'll be better equipped to face life's stresses with a sense of calm presence. With practice, you might even respond intelligently and with compassion, rather than falling back into habitual reactions or being swept into a panic. This is the work of a lifetime and it begins with this one simple pose. ■

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# Seal the Deal

We usually don't think much about our fingers and toes during practice, unless we remember to spread the former in Downward-Facing Dog, or happen to stub the latter on a wooden block we've left lying around. But our fingers and toes (as well as our hands and feet) are charged with divine power, which, when intelligently accessed and properly applied, can intensify the transformative power of the practice.

You may have seen drawings or photos of yogis with their fingers pretzeled into odd configurations and wondered what they were doing. Each of these gestures, called a *mudra* (seal), is an archetypal or ritualized hand-pantomime, a visual "message" akin to a hieroglyph or ideogram. There are countless numbers of mudras, some made with one hand, others with two, some fairly simple, others considerably more complex. Although mudras can also be made with the tongue or eyes, we'll focus on hand mudras.

Symbolically, a mudra seals or "stamps" the mark of the god or goddess on the practitioner much like a signet ring

stamps an impression on soft wax, signaling her complete devotion and self-surrender.

When linked etymologically with the verb *mud*, "to delight," the word *mudra* also suggests that by performing these gestures, we bring delight to our chosen deity. And it's said that during

pranayama and meditation, a mudra helps seal prana in and recycle it throughout the body, preventing it from leaking out through the fingers. Moreover, the fixed hand position helps quiet restless fingers and in turn calms the brain. As an added bonus, some texts claim, mudras confer magical powers on the practitioner, such as healing others' illnesses (and maybe even exacting revenge on enemies) and assisting in the awakening of kundalini.

Traditionally mudras aren't performed with the feet. But still, the print your bare *pada* (foot) leaves on the ground is

called a *pada mudra*, a "foot seal." Such a seal, when made by a deity like Vishnu or a sage, is worshipped with offerings of flowers and prayers. RICHARD ROSEN

## EXERCISE

One of the best-known mudras is the *jnana mudra* (wisdom seal), which you can practice while sitting in meditation or pranayama. Touch the tip of your thumbs to the tip of the same-hand index finger, forming a circle, and extend the remaining digits away from their palms. In mudra "language," the thumb is the Great Self, the index finger the individual self, their joining indicative of self-realization. The other three digits stand for the elements that make up the natural world, which the individual self both is attached to and transcends.

David Swenson and Shelley Washington — photo: Yoga Vermont



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