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BETWEEN

Transitions are a powerful part of practice. Take them slowly, and you'll build strength and awareness that serve you on and off the mat.

 **I am by nature** a fast walker. You won't find me ambling down a street unless it's winding and paved with cobblestones and I'm on vacation. I never thought much of it until a friend in college told me that he hated walking to class with me because I rushed him. He preferred to walk slowly and take in the scenery. One day, he astutely pointed out that by focusing all my energy

BY JASON CRANDELL \* PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ANDRE



## refined warriors

Learn to transition gracefully into big, beautiful poses and discover an experience that's more accessible and enjoyable.

### virabhadrasana I (warrior pose I) >>>

on getting from one place to another, I was missing out on all sorts of “in between” moments in my life. It was his way of conveying the old adage that the journey is just as important as the destination. And he was right. I’d never given much thought to my walk to and from class, but when I was able to rein myself in and consciously slow down, the whole world around me came into vivid focus. The flowers, the trees, and the pond on our campus—they all came to life. I breathed easier and actually enjoyed my eight-minute walk instead of being preoccupied with what was going to happen next.

The same tendency often shows up on the yoga mat. We ignore the moments in between our poses, instead focusing our attention on getting into the next pose. We hurl ourselves through Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) and Up Dog just to get to the stillness and ease of Downward-Facing Dog. Once we get into the more advanced poses, such as Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand), we may think we don’t need to pay attention to the moments leading into and out of the poses. We either rush through the transitions or tune them out completely. There are a couple of reasons for this, the most obvious being that transitions are nowhere near as rewarding to the ego as the glory of a full pose. So, just as we do in life, we often avoid

**The transition from Virabhadrasana I to Virabhadrasana III** shifts the body from a stable, rooted posture to one of yoga’s most challenging standing balances. If you use momentum to move from Warrior I to Warrior III, you’ll likely lose your balance because it will be hard to slow the momentum down, and you’ll throw yourself off center. But if you glide slowly and mindfully from one pose to the next, your body will find its balance point more easily. Taking the transition slowly will also strengthen your front leg, your abdominal muscles, and your back body. As you train your mind to observe the sensations of movement and balance, you will have the opportunity to practice maintaining your awareness in a difficult and changing situation.

**Begin in Virabhadrasana I** with your left leg forward. Bring your attention to your front foot. When people lose their balance in this pose, they almost always fall forward and to the outer edge of the front foot. To counteract this tendency, root down through the base of your big toe and the front edge of your heel. Now, bring your hands to your hips and lean forward so that most of your weight is in your front leg. Lift your back heel, coming to the ball of your right foot. Continue to slowly lean forward until your ribs meet your front thigh. Extend your arms straight back toward your outer hips.

MODEL: STEPHANIE BERNSTEIN; STYLIST: LYN HEINEKEN; HAIR/MAKEUP: FRANCE PIERSON



## virabhadrasana III (*warrior pose III*)

Pause and feel the intensity building in your front thigh. Notice the impulse to rush into the next phase of the pose in order to bypass the searing sensation in your quadriceps. Instead, take a slow deep breath and practice staying calm in the midst of the difficulty.

» Enter the next phase of this transition by shifting your upper body forward until the majority of your weight is directly above and in front of your standing leg. Once you do this, your back leg will lift off the ground with very little effort. Continue into Virabhadrasana III by slowly straightening both legs and reaching your arms forward. Take a moment to refine the pose: Ground the base of your big toe and the front of your heel; draw up through the muscles of your standing thigh; level both hips by lifting the inseam of your right thigh while your outer right hip drops. Reach strongly through your

right thigh and press your heel away. Lengthen your torso so that it is parallel to the floor. Take one more settling breath before initiating the transition back to Virabhadrasana I.

» Try not to let the movement from Virabhadrasana III to Virabhadrasana I devolve into a free fall. Having just completed a strenuous pose, you might naturally want to check out and cruise on autopilot. Instead, draw your attention into the present moment and focus on moving slowly and consciously.

» Bend your front knee to begin your descent. As you start to lower your right leg, lean your torso forward. This will counterbalance the weight of your lower body and keep you from crashing the back foot heavily into the floor. Bring your arms by your sides or onto your hips. As you continue to descend, focus on keeping the weight of your body directly over the standing leg to avoid leaning too far back. This will build strength and control and will allow

you to place your back foot softly on the ground. Once the back foot has landed, slowly lift your torso to vertical and reach your arms overhead in Virabhadrasana I. Congratulations! You've landed without waking the neighbors who live below you.

**Take a moment to feel** the effects of this slow transition. Become aware of the sensation in your front thigh, the increased heat in your body, and the demand that has been placed on your breath. Repeat this transition two to three more times and focus on gliding in and out of the postures smoothly. Observe how this practice builds intensity in your body as it simultaneously refines your movements and focuses your mind. Now try the same transition on the other side.

## glide to the moon

Instead of launching forward with hardened determination, pause and steady yourself. Lean rather than leap. There is no hurry to get anywhere in your practice—because you're already there.



## Utthita Parsvakonasana (*Extended Side Angle Pose*) >>>

the less comfortable or attractive places in our yoga practice in order to get to the final pose.

Transitions in yoga, as in life, are hard. When the body is well aligned in a pose, there's often a sense of ease, as the bones absorb much of your body weight and the muscles support and stabilize you. During transitions, your brain has to figure out the actions, and your muscles have to move your weight from one plane to another. Moving slowly through transitions is more demanding, mentally and physically. But if you always rely on momentum to take you to the next pose, you'll never build the strength to stop using your momentum. Those moments when your muscles are shaking as you move from Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose) to Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II) are opportunities to create strength and integrity in your body. If you don't take advantage of them, you'll strengthen only the already-strong aspects of your practice and skip over the weak ones, leaving yourself ill prepared for new challenges.

Momentum can be risky, too. When you push yourself, you risk missing a cue that your body can't handle the pose you're moving into. Or, if you have poor alignment in a transition and you quickly move through it over and over (hello again, Chaturanga-Up Dog-Down Dog!), you risk injury. But if you slow down and really pay attention,

**Like the transition** from Warrior I to III, shifting from Side Angle Pose to Half Moon Pose will challenge you to find a subtle balance point. Notice whether Half Moon Pose is easier for you than Warrior III. If it is easier, do you find yourself rushing through the transition even more than in the previous poses?

When something is easier, we think it requires less attention. But, remember, rushing through the transition will only make it harder for you to find balance when you come into Half Moon. If you can glide slowly and mindfully through these poses, however, your balance will become much steadier. After all, the way you arrive somewhere affects your experience once you're there. Imagine the feeling you have when you get to work after a slow, calm morning as opposed to how you feel after sleeping through your alarm, skipping your morning practice, and knowing you're late to a meeting. Similarly, a smooth approach into Ardha Chandrasana will deliver a steadier landing.

**Begin in Side Angle Pose** with your left leg forward. Initiate the transition to Half Moon Pose by stepping your back foot halfway to your front foot. Bend your front knee deeply and move your upper body forward beyond your front toes. Reach your left hand forward and down—placing it on the floor or on a block—to the left of your pinkie toe and slightly beyond your shoulders. Glance down at your front knee and notice whether it has rotated inward. This is a common misalignment



## Ardha Chandrasana (*Half Moon Pose*)

that can strain the inner knee. Instead, turn your left knee gently outward so that your standing thigh, knee, shin, ankle, and foot all track forward in the same line.

>> Continue by leaning your torso further forward until all your weight is divided between your left leg and arm—your back leg should feel weightless, and your front leg should feel loaded. Lift your back foot a few inches off the floor and pause in the middle of this movement. Notice whether you are tempted to just get on with it already and bust into Half Moon. Instead, continue to hover midway between Side Angle and Half Moon, steeping yourself in the intensity of the transition and allowing the movements to cultivate strength in your standing leg. Gaze at your front foot and find your balance. Root down through any part of the foot that seems ungrounded.

>> Complete the transition to Half Moon by slowly straightening your

standing leg and lifting your back thigh strongly toward the ceiling. Reach your top arm toward the ceiling and broaden your chest. Although balance can be difficult in this pose, observe the relative stillness in your posture today. Since you stepped slowly and mindfully into the pose, you don't have to contain the excessive momentum that goes with rushing into the pose. Also, because you have tuned your awareness in to your body in the transitional movement, your attention will already be present. Since you are practicing the transitions rather than the poses, spend only one or two breaths savoring the expansiveness of Half Moon Pose.

>> Now, preparing to step back into Side Angle Pose, bring your attention to your torso. If you allow your torso to shift along with the lowering of your right leg to the floor, you'll plummet like a cartoon anvil falling off a cliff. Instead, bend your front knee slowly and continue to lean your torso forward over your front toes as your back foot

reaches toward the ground. Keep your torso forward to counterbalance the weight of your hips and top leg as they shift toward Side Angle Pose. Extending your torso as you bend your front knee will also strengthen your standing leg and abdomen, because it will require these areas to support the weight of your body for much longer. As your back foot lowers all the way to the floor with steadiness and control, reach it as far back as you can. Listen to how quietly your foot touches the ground. If it wasn't terribly quiet and you woke your neighbor, it's not a problem. It just means that you may need to continue practicing this transition.

**Practice the transition** between Side Angle Pose and Half Moon Pose two to three more times. Imagine that you're moving in slow motion, and observe the physical intensity building. Then do the other side.

you give yourself the opportunity to notice what is happening in your body.

Finally, paying attention to your transitions can bring your focus back to the journey instead of the destination. When we rush through transitions, we fool ourselves into thinking that once we arrive somewhere—whether it’s a pose, a classroom, or a life stage—we will pay attention and become present. But this is a fallacy, because presence takes practice. And really, each moment in life is equally important, regardless of what the ego may try to dictate. The third breath in Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose) is not more important than the first step that shifts the body into the pose.

When you tune in to transitional moments, you’ll begin to sense that the whole continuum of your practice—from the time you unroll your mat to the closing “Namaste”—can be a seamless process of paying deep attention to the body, mind, and breath. When you’re able to do this, not only will you get satisfaction from those moments when you get into a big pose, but you’ll also enjoy the quality of your practice as a whole. An observer will be able to see this in your practice—have you ever seen an “advanced” yogi unfurl herself slowly into a beautifully balanced Headstand? Each moment is as defined and nuanced as the next.

Focus on the transitions from Virabhadrasana I to Virabhadrasana III, Parsvakonasana to Ardha Chandrasana, and Malasana (Garland Pose) to Bakasana (Crane Pose). Each minisequence moves your body from a relatively stable, accessible pose to a more demanding one that requires balance. They also move you from simple postures to complex postures that are more enticing to the ego. As you practice, observe your thoughts. Are you anxious to get to the harder pose? Bored during the transition? Try to let go of the outcome and tune in to your moment-to-moment awareness.

Practice each transition two to four times. You’ll develop a greater technical understanding of the transitions by moving slowly and meticulously. Gliding seamlessly from pose to pose will generate heat, strength, and mental toughness as you repeat and hone your movements in the spaces between the postures. As you refine these transitions, you’ll not only realize that they are as worthy as the poses themselves, but you may also find that giving them extra attention improves the quality of the postures once you arrive. ❖

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## relaxed flight

Enjoy the process of trying new things. Don’t worry about getting into any final pose; patience and practice are the keys here.



## Malasana (Garland Pose) >>>

**The arm balance Bakasana** tends to polarize people. It brings up either the desire to get there and show off or a feeling that you’ll never get into the pose. As you practice this transition, notice whether you have feelings of attachment or aversion that wipe away your ability to move slowly, patiently, and mindfully. If you struggle to get into the pose, treat each moment of the transition with equal care and attention. By allowing your body to open and your mind to relax, you’ll learn how to transition skillfully into the pose, which will make it more accessible. If it’s easy for you to throw yourself into the pose, see whether moving gracefully will require half the effort.

**Come into Malasana.** Bring the inner edges of your feet together and bend your knees into a deep squat. Make sure that the insides of your feet are touching and your knees are separated slightly wider than your shoulders. Lower your torso between your inner knees and slide your upper arms down the front of your shins.

>> To begin the transition into Bakasana, reach forward and place your hands on the floor shoulder-width apart approximately one foot in front of your toes. Spread your fingers wide and press through the circumference of each palm. Squeeze your inner knees firmly against your upper arms and begin to lean forward slowly so that your weight begins to transfer from your feet to your hands. Lift your hips slightly and draw your elbows toward



## Bakasana (*Crane Pose*)

each other. Engage your abdominal muscles moderately to help support the weight of your midsection and pelvis. At this point of transition, many students mistakenly try to lift up into the pose. You don't want to lift up, or your pelvis will move too high and you'll hop into the balance or muscle into it with your shoulder strength. You want to move forward, not upward. So keep leaning forward until your forearms are vertical and the majority of your weight is in your hands. Notice that your toes are becoming lighter on the sticky mat.

>> Take a breath as you pause for a moment and feel the intensity in your body before you put the finishing touches on the transition.

>> Don't try to lift your feet in the last stage of the transition. Rather, continue to lean forward until your feet begin to lift off the floor naturally. There is a significant difference between these two approaches. In the first approach, you're still trying to lift up before the weight of the body is evenly distributed and balanced. In the second approach, the feet are lifting as a result of being in balance. If your feet don't lift all the way up, it's not a problem. You may just

need more practice with this transition. If your feet do lift, practice lifting your feet even farther away from the floor and straightening your elbows. (Now you can press your whole body up!) Keep squeezing your knees in, engaging your abdomen, and keeping your weight centered directly above your forearms. Be sure that you take only one breath in the pose before shifting your weight slowly back to your feet.

**Try not to get caught up** in achieving the perfect Bakasana—in fact, forget about Bakasana. Instead, shift back and forth between these poses two to three times, focusing on your body's continuous movement. Let this gliding unravel the tunnel vision habit and the grasping at poses.

**To close your practice** Reflect on the slow, mindful, and continuous movement you explored in the transitions between the various postures. Now, cultivate the opposite end of the movement spectrum: stillness. To segue from the rhythm of transitions to the quietness of stillness, first settle your body and mind.

Separate your legs wide apart in Upavistha Konasana (Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend). Once you release into the forward bend, allow your eyes to close and take several slow, calming breaths. Without becoming rigid or tense, practice letting go of all unnecessary movements. Stay in the pose for two to five minutes, and encourage your internal cadence to slow down.

Follow Upavistha Konasana by gently twisting into Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose) on both sides. In this pose, encourage your body, mind, and nerves to move toward greater stillness. Conclude your practice with 10 minutes in Savasana (Corpse Pose).