



Eyes, temples,
and forehead
are soft

Forehead is level
with the chin

Both sides of the waist
lengthen equally

Knees are
straight,
not locked

for beginners

Triangle Pose

Trikonasana

(tree-koh-NAH-suh-nuh)

TRI MEANS "THREE"; KONA MEANS "ANGLE"; ASANA MEANS "SEAT."

By Jason Crandell | Photography by Thomas Broening

You stand on them every day, but you'd be surprised by how much you take your legs for granted. It's easy to forget their power and grace, especially if you have bad knees or tight hamstrings or achy feet. During those times when you're feeling disconnected from your lower half, Trikonasana (Triangle Pose) can help bring you back. Before you know it, you'll come to crave this elegant, powerful pose. I know because it happened to me.

I used to loathe Triangle Pose. Just thinking about it made me feel frustrated, vulnerable, and irritated. Every time I did it, I felt it exposed my physical restrictions, imbalances, and weaknesses. Once I figured out that Trikonasana teaches the three physical principles in hatha yoga I cherish the most—stability, expansion, and evenness—I fell in love with it. Now I

Legs are extended vigorously



don't

lean your weight into your bottom arm.



don't

shorten the bottom side of your waist.



don't

allow your torso to swing out in front of your legs.

practice it almost every day, slip it into nearly every sequence, and teach it to beginning students in every class.

Trikonasana, like so many yoga poses, combines many elements in one posture. It builds strength and steadiness in the legs and feet, creates magnificent expansion and space in the torso as the arms and legs reach outward, and cultivates *sama* (evenness) in the body. And as you balance the effort between your arms, legs, and torso, your state of mind becomes steady and even as well. As the mind reaches the shores of the body and you turn your consciousness inward, the true experience of yoga, or union, begins.

Take It in Stride

A solid Trikonasana begins with a steady, comfortable stride, so it's important to figure out what that feels like. To begin, stand lengthwise on your mat with your feet parallel and about four feet apart. Turn your right foot (we'll refer to it as your front foot) out so it faces the top of your mat and align your front heel with your back heel. Then turn your back foot in about 15 to 20 degrees. Next, bend your front knee until it is directly over your heel and glance down at your front thigh; it should be nearly parallel to the floor.

Most beginners start with a stride that is too short, so you may need to separate your feet farther. Keeping your front knee directly over your heel, slowly inch your left foot backward. Then restraighten your front leg and look at the distance between your feet. This is it: your unique stride for Trikonasana. If your legs and pelvis are less flexible and you can't bring your front thigh parallel to the floor without distorting your feet or straining your legs, knees, or lower back, take a shorter stride.

Expand Your Triangle

Now that you've established a solid foundation, you're ready to move into Trikonasana. First, take a block (if you don't have one, a hardcover book will do) and place it on the outside of your front foot. Start with the block at its highest. Once you're in the pose, you can readjust if necessary.

Bring your arms to a T position at shoulder height. Extend strongly through

MODIFICATION



Try It with a Chair

WHY When you place your bottom hand on a chair seat in Triangle, you can maintain a feeling of spaciousness and freedom in the pose—especially in the torso—even if you're less flexible in your hips and legs. You can also practice the pose safely without straining your lower back, sacrum, or knees. If you are hyperflexible, the chair will keep you supported. This modification emphasizes stability, which can help you build the necessary strength for the pose without causing undue stress on your joints.

HOW Place the chair by your front foot. Inhale as you bring your arms to a T position. As you exhale and move into the pose, release your bottom hand to the chair seat; keep your top arm reaching out in the same plane as the bottom arm. You should feel enough support to remain steady and calm, and still feel a stretch in your front leg. Breathe evenly and smoothly, appreciating the spaciousness and support that the prop provides.

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both arms and legs, and reach up through the crown of the head to lengthen your torso toward the ceiling. Your arms and legs should feel as if they are expanding out of your core and becoming longer and more vibrant with each breath. Next, reground the outer edge of your back foot and lift your right hip away from the front of your thigh. Inhale deeply as you bring your left hand to your hip and gaze over your right fingertips. Then exhale as you slowly fold at the hip crease and bend to the right. As you come into the pose, lengthen both sides of the torso evenly. Reach your bottom arm down until your hand firmly roots onto your block. Balance the reach through your bottom arm with a surge of energy through your top arm, extending it toward the sky. Take a full round of breath here and enjoy the sense of space and expansion in your chest, lungs, and heart.

It's common to lean too far forward, swinging the torso in front of the legs and pushing the butt out. Instead, keep your torso and pelvis over your legs and in the same plane as your feet—not an easy task if you don't have enough flexibility in your legs and hips. You might need to modify the pose by bringing the right hand to a chair (*see page 60*).

Get Even

Now that you're in Trikonasana, you can refine the pose and create more evenness. Once again, bring your attention to your feet and legs. Make sure that all four corners of both feet bear weight evenly and that the back foot is still turned in 15 to 20 degrees. To awaken your feet and enliven the pose, lift and spread your toes several times, imagining that your feet are squishing through mud. Then use the strength of your legs to firmly root your feet into the floor, being careful not to jam or lock your front knee. Instead, rotate your front thigh out so the kneecap is aligned with the center of your front foot. Firm the tops of your thighs near the hip creases and hug your leg muscles to the bones for support. Stay here for two breaths as you continue to extend through your legs.

Now bring your attention to your pelvis. To determine the appropriate degree

of rotation for your body, you'll have to play a little. With time and practice, the pelvis will balance over the legs and face the side wall. But that isn't easy in the beginning. For now, you'll have to experiment until you can strike a balance between tucking the butt under forcefully and sticking it out behind you.

To find the ideal placement of your pelvis, place your left hand on your hip and rotate the pelvis up and down. First, roll your top hip down so the front of your pelvis is facing the floor, then roll it back up so the front of your pelvis is facing the side wall. Repeat this a few times to get a feeling for how well your pelvis rotates. Finally, roll your top hip up one more time, until the front of your pelvis and chest face the side wall.

What's most important is that you stop rotating your pelvis once the easy, fluid movement ceases. Many practitioners overrotate their pelvis toward the ceiling and compress the lower back and sacrum. To avoid this, don't push your pelvis past its endpoint. Instead, find the rotation of your pelvis that makes your lower back and sacrum feel comfortable—even if this means that the top hip rolls a bit more toward the floor.

Next, bring your attention to your torso. Rather than shortening the bottom side of your waist—you'll know this is happening if the top ribs puff up in



Pose Benefits

Reduces stiffness in the hips

Tones leg muscles

Relieves backache and neck sprain

Strengthens the ankles

Develops the chest

Contraindications

Sacroiliac pain

Third trimester of pregnancy

Hamstring injury



Stand Tall

Standing poses are the foundation of many contemporary styles of hatha yoga. They're accessible, easy to modify, and extremely thorough: They cultivate strength, suppleness, and awareness in your feet, legs, pelvis, torso, shoulders, and arms. They also increase vitality, counteracting the effects of a sedentary life.

Standing poses can provide insight into your restrictions, illuminating areas that feel particularly tight and bound, sensitive and vulnerable, or weak and unstable. When the going gets tough in these poses, you can observe your reactions and habitual responses to difficult situations. While the shapes of the asanas may differ, these tips apply to all standing poses.

WAKE UP YOUR LOWER HALF The legs are the workhorses of the body. They support, stabilize, and propel you with vitality and ease. Your feet are, by design, beautifully intricate, complex, and responsive. When your legs and feet aren't taken through their natural range of motion, they become stagnant and dull—imagine a horse never taken out of its stable. Standing poses stretch and strengthen the legs and feet so they function optimally. Working your legs thoroughly also improves circulation, supports digestion, and energizes the entire body.

STAY STRAIGHT Standing poses increase your awareness of body alignment. You can observe how your feet align with your legs and pelvis, how your arms align with your shoulders and chest, and so on. As you refine this awareness, you cultivate greater physical integration and develop increased physical stability.

STAND YOUR GROUND Many of us are overworked and overstimulated mentally but out of shape physically. Our bodies are lethargic and dull. Standing poses ask us to focus intensely, yet quietly, on the body. This type of attention soothes the mind, lessening psychological tension and grounding you emotionally.

FIND BALANCE Standing poses require an even distribution of weight between both legs. You must also root evenly through the front, back, and sides of each foot. When you establish this, you can more easily find your center. This makes it easier to find your balance in other poses, and perhaps even in life.

ARM YOURSELF Different standing poses stretch, align, and strengthen your arms in different ways. When you practice a series of them, you take your shoulders through a range of movements, which increases mobility and releases tension in the upper body.

GO FORTH Since standing poses create stability, suppleness, and awareness in your legs, hips, torso, and shoulders, they are the perfect poses to prepare your body for other asanas. —J.C.

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an arch—extend and lengthen the bottom ribs, keeping both sides of your waist as even as possible. This is another challenging task if you aren't sufficiently flexible. Remember to be patient and compassionate with yourself; you can place your hand on a block or a chair if that works better for you.

As you stretch your torso to its maximum without overeffort, reach through your arms as if they were branches extending from your heart. Keep your shoulders stable by centering your arms in their joints rather than throwing them forward or backward. Rotate your chest skyward and let the top of your breastbone move backward in a mild, freeing backbend. Your upper chest and arms should feel like they are lifted by a light breeze. Rather

than looking toward the ceiling—which is a more advanced rotation of the head and neck—look straight ahead with soft, receptive eyes.

Take another deep breath and scan your body. Have you neglected any areas? For your last few breaths, savor the calm-

Make Trikonasana your own by being playful and curious. Ultimately, you'll find that it teaches your body to become more spacious and lively.

ing stability, exhilarating expansion, and mindful evenness that is Trikonasana.

After eight to 10 breaths in Trikonasana exhale and press your back foot firmly into the ground. Reach your top arm toward the back wall, and lift your torso until you come all the way back up to standing. Bring your arms back down by your sides and turn your feet parallel. Pause briefly before moving to the second side.

Cultivate Curiosity

To initiate your own love affair with this complex and challenging pose, approach it as an ongoing experiment. Each time you practice, revisit Triangle with a different emphasis—explore different strides, play around with the rotation in your pelvis, move your arms in their joints until they feel integrated with the shoulders. Lastly, practice Trikonasana on occasion with no instructional reference. Let your breath guide you into the pose. Then, simply be there and notice the sensations that arise. What subtle shifts create more grounding, expansion, and evenness in your pose? Make Trikonasana your own by being playful and curious. Ultimately, you'll find that it teaches your body to become more spacious and lively. And you'll learn to circulate awareness throughout your body, drawing your consciousness inward and uniting your mind, body, and breath. ■

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Three's a Charm

The Sanskrit *tri* is etymologically related to the English word "three." Yogis are awfully fond of numbered lists, and threes play a major role in their theology, philosophy, and metaphysics. Take the *tri-murti*, or "three forms," of the Absolute—the deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Or the *tri-loka*, or "three worlds," of hell, earth, and heaven. Finally, there's the *tri-guna*, or "three strands"—forces that compose the substance of the material world.

It's thought that the whole universe is composed of differing proportions of gunas. While they're described as separate entities, it's better to think of the gunas as categories of waves spread over a wide spectrum, like light or sound. At one end of the spectrum is *tamas* (darkness), which is inertia or heaviness. Its polar opposite is *sattva*, which can't be translated precisely but is defined variously as "being," "existence," "spiritual essence," "goodness," and "consciousness." *Sattva* is the aspect of matter closest in nature to the divine Self. The motive force behind these two is *rajas* (colored), which is raw energy or passion.

The gunas are used to characterize and understand natural objects or phenomena. For example, a chunk of granite is pre-

dominantly tamasic, a tornado rajasic, and sunlight sattvic. But what's interesting in yoga is that human consciousness is also considered a material process. This means that our transient moods and more permanent personalities can generally be characterized according to the gunas. You've probably occasionally

felt tamasic—that is, dark and heavy—and you must know a few intemperate human tornados or rajasics who can never sit still and concentrate. You might even know someone who's remarkably calm and light or insightful—most likely your sattvic yoga teacher.

The gunas can also apply to our daily practice. Some days we're as ponderous as a boulder; other days we're revved up. Then there are those rare days when we sattvically float through our practice. Traditional texts suggest we cultivate our sattvic nature, at the expense of tamas and rajas. But I believe it's better to cultivate a balance of the three gunas, so that, simultaneously, we're tamasically grounded to the earth, rajasically passionate about our work, and sattvically reaching for our goal, which is the realization of our authentic Self. —Richard Rosen

TUNE INTO YOUR GUNA

Your yoga practice most likely goes through *guna* periods, shifting back and forth between tamas and rajas, with every now and then—if you're lucky—a *sattvic* day. Dedicate one practice to the gunas. Be aware, in every pose you do, how each of the gunas expresses itself. Determine the dominant *guna* and encourage its compatriots sitting on the sidelines to come and join the game.

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