



Poses We Hate

No matter how advanced your practice is, surely there are asanas you'd just as soon avoid. Here, five top teachers divulge their nemeses and what they've learned by practicing them.

BY NINA ZOLOTOW AND JASON CRANDELL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOIS GREENFIELD



Patricia Walden on

MARICHYASANA I

(Pose Dedicated to the Sage Marichi I)

When I first started practicing this pose, it was a real struggle. I had natural length in my hamstrings but not in my buttocks or paraspinal muscles, so I was unbalanced; all my weight fell on my straight-leg side, and I had no ability to bend forward. My body felt dense and contracted, like a closed fist, and my breathing was restricted. There was no place in the pose where I could find space and freedom.

But I kept practicing Marichyasana I very regularly as part of a traditional forward-bending sequence. I would start with a modified version, sitting up on a blanket and extending my arms forward rather than clasping them behind me. This made it easier to elongate my waist and rib cage. I would repeat this version briefly two or three times on each side; because I had so much physical and mental resistance, repeating it was better than holding it for a long time. When I would finally come into the full pose with the clasp later in the practice session, it would be easier because of all the preparation I had done.

After about 10 years, I finally began to feel in Marichyasana the internal spaciousness and surrender that I love. Now it is one of my favorite forward bends. I think when you work through any difficult situation, it is a form of *tapas* [discipline and purification] and builds confidence and mental strength. You've taken on something really challenging and come out on the other side.

IF YOU'VE EVER EXPERIENCED NEGATIVE FEELINGS OR EVEN—DARE WE SAY IT?—HATE FOR CERTAIN YOGA POSES, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. IN FACT, YOU'RE IN VERY GOOD COMPANY.

Many popular and accomplished yoga teachers have also struggled with certain asanas, including some of the most basic ones. Patricia Walden, one of only two advanced senior Iyengar teachers in the United States, spent years hating “that God-awful Marichyasana I.” Baron Baptiste, who offers his popular yoga “bootcamps” all over the country, used to get horribly frustrated when he did Garudasana, because he’d fall out of the pose if he tried to wrap his foot around his ankle. And popular vinyasa teacher and yoga trance dance creator Shiva Rea still calls her least favorite pose “Poor Me Purvottanasana.”

Yet, as these teachers would be the first to tell you, the very poses we hate are some of the most valuable ones for us to practice. Fortunately, there are many tactics that not only can make it easier to practice those bothersome poses, but also can make the experience less daunting—and maybe even fun. If you apply the tips and tricks outlined in this article, you’ll see why it’s so valuable to work on asanas you struggle with, gain insight about just why you hate the poses you do, and discover how to turn your nemeses into your greatest teachers.

EVERY DIFFICULTY HAS A SILVER LINING

So why, you might ask, would you want to practice poses you loathe? For one thing, these poses often specifically address your physical imbalances; they build strength and flexibility in exactly the places that need it most. If you sit hunched all day in front of a computer, backbends may be difficult for you, but they’re also just what your body needs. Or maybe years of running have left you with tight hamstrings. It would be no surprise if you despise forward bends, but those are exactly the poses that will move you toward physical balance.

In addition, doing poses you find physically difficult or that scare you can be a great antidote to staleness in your practice; it’s exhilarating to take on new challenges. And even if you don’t achieve immediate results, you’ll often find that a sweet feeling of relief arises when you face difficulties instead of evading them.

Practicing poses you tend to shun also teaches you to cultivate equanimity in the face of challenge. When you take the time during your yoga practice to study how you deal with difficulty, you may gain insights that will assist you with the tough stuff elsewhere in your life. Do you ignore difficulty? Approach it timidly? Rush at it headlong? Become overwhelmed by it? Once you identify habits that aren’t serving you, you can begin

the process of pausing, taking a deep breath, and searching for a more effective approach.

Regularly facing the poses you find most intimidating can also help you change your self-image—from incapable to capable, say, or from timid to brave. For instance, Patricia Walden says Handstand is a “power pose” for many female students. She’s observed that learning to get up and stay up in it builds so much confidence and mental strength that the experience is often life-changing.

SEVEN TACTICS FOR TRANSFORMATION

OK, so maybe by now you’re kinda sorta convinced that practicing poses you find onerous might be a good idea. But where do you start? The thought of forcing yourself to do one of your least favorite poses the same old unpleasant way probably feels discouraging—and it’s not the most helpful method, either. Instead, stand back for a moment and consider the following steps for transforming your relationship with these poses.

IDENTIFY YOUR DISCOMFORT. Your first step should be determining exactly why you loathe a pose. Understanding why you dislike it so much is the key to figuring out how to come to terms with it.

One of the most obvious reasons is that it causes you physical discomfort or even pain. Such discomfort can take a lot of different forms. Many students say Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand) and Halasana (Plow Pose) make them feel trapped and claustrophobic. Others complain that their breathing feels constricted in twists, or that they just feel jammed and stuck in some forward bends and backbends.

Over time, you should be able to reduce and maybe even eliminate these discomforts. Do keep in mind, of course, that some mild muscle pain may be inevitable along the way as you ask your body to move and stretch in ways that it doesn’t in daily life. (Caution: Always pay attention to sharp pain; it is usually an important message from your body indicating that you should back off immediately.)

Another reason you might hate a pose is that it causes you fear. Maybe you worry about harming yourself: hurting your lower back in backbends, straining your neck in Shoulderstand, or falling on your face in arm balances. Or you may experience so much disorientation—or sheer terror—in inversions like Headstand and Handstand that you find yourself making an

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Barbara Benagh on

SARVANGASANA

(Shoulderstand)

For many years, Shoulderstand was more than frustrating—it was a horror. I had old shoulder, collarbone, and neck injuries from an auto wreck, and even though I practiced the pose using a mountain of blankets, sometimes I'd still have episodes of intense neck pain. One day in class, I had only one blanket to use when my teacher said "Shoulderstand," and I felt a huge wave of anxiety. How would I do it without my Band-Aid blankets? Later, in a different class, I received a terrible Shoulderstand adjustment, had a temper tantrum, and decided to divorce the pose forever.

Eventually, though, I realized I missed the soothing qualities of the pose. So I decided to explore it again. To get in touch with the landmarks of my shoulders, neck, and upper spine, I started with my back flat on the floor in Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose). Then I slowly developed my Shoulderstand through actions instead of by propping myself up. I found that if I pressed the back of my head and elbows down, my cervical spine and chest rose upward. Then, as I continued this rooting and slowly brought my pelvis higher, my legs floated and my body felt like a rocket ship soaring into space. To this day, when I lose that rocket ship sensation, I come down.

Shoulderstand continues to be difficult for me, but I finally feel at home while practicing it. It has taught me that you can try to avoid things, but ultimately they lie in wait for you. And it has also taught me that it's often best to walk away from something you're struggling with, chew on it, and return with a clearer perspective.





Shiva Rea on

PURVOTTANASANA

(Upward Plank Pose)

When I do Purvottanasana, I tend to feel compression around my sacrum. To avoid this, I have to work really hard to elongate my lower back and internally rotate my thighs to broaden my sacral area. Even when I do that work, I can't ground my feet well because my calves are so puny. And without that foundation, I can't lift my pelvis high enough to get a good opening in my front body. And the energy flow of the pose—it just feels so stuck. I did Purvottanasana almost every day for 10 years as part of the Ashtanga primary series, and it got incrementally easier, but I never really had a breakthrough.

Most of the time these days, I do Purvottanasana with bent knees. That lets me experience its strength instead of being blocked by my weakness, my spindly calves. I also use creative, fluid ways to approach the pose, like coming into it from Vasisthasana (Side Plank Pose) instead of lifting up from Dandasana (Staff Pose). This method creates more opening in the front of my torso and my shoulders. It also allows me to access my intuitive spirit to feel my way into my best expression of the pose. I think most of us experience lifting from Dandasana into Purvottanasana as a real grunt; coming into it more fluidly allows the inner *bhava* [the taste or flavor of the experience] to not be shocked by that energetic grunt.

Although I haven't exactly learned to love Purvottanasana, it's important to me not to avoid it, because it teaches me about my aversions and their roots. It has also helped me realize that there are many different paths up the mountain; there are ways to receive the opening of Purvottanasana without forcing my body or obsessing about perfect outer form.





Seane Corn on

PARIVRTTA TRIKONASANA

(Revolved Triangle Pose)

I have a slight scoliosis [a sideways curve of the spine], so one side of my spine is really restricted. When I do Parivrtta Trikonasana on my challenged side, I have to be on my fingertips or even a block to get the spinal extension I need. On a physical level, the pose is really restricted; I can't breathe freely, and it often just doesn't feel good. And in terms of my ego, it's very humbling.

But unless I'm doing a restorative session, I always include Parivrtta Trikonasana in my practice, because I know the pose is one of my greatest teachers. Sometimes I'll just make it part of my warm-up. Other times I'll create an entire sequence around it and make it the apex of the session.

To prepare for the pose, I'll practice Sun Salutations to warm up my body and then do some hamstring-stretching poses and a series of basic floor twists. To come into Parivrtta Trikonasana, sometimes I start from Parsvottanasana with my hands on the floor, or I'll do a modified Parivrtta Trikonasana with my front knee bent so I can focus on the rotation in my torso.

Parivrtta Trikonasana on my difficult side has definitely helped teach me humility—and patience, acceptance, and surrender. When I'm in a difficult situation these days, sometimes I think to myself, "Well, this is just Parivrtta Trikonasana." In the past, if something was uncomfortable, I might have just avoided it. Now, the more challenged I am, the more interested I am: Why don't I want to go there? What can this teach me?

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unnecessary and exceptionally long trip to the restroom every time your teacher calls for them.

Finally, difficulties with a pose are often compounded by embarrassment or shame. Some students hate Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) because it makes them feel like a weakling; others suffer from performance anxiety in Virabhadrasana III (Warrior Pose III) and Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose), worrying that they are going to fall out of the poses in front of the whole class.

Once you've figured out exactly why certain poses are so irksome to you, you can begin to employ specific tactics to address your personal challenges.

USE PROPS AND POSE VARIATIONS. If you take a moment to think about it, you may realize that you already know variations and props to make a pose you find difficult much more accessible. If you need more suggestions, most teachers can give you a hand. Patricia Walden, Barbara Benagh, and Seane Corn all cite props and modifications as crucial in their work with difficult poses (*see pages 131, 133, and 137*).

As part of this approach, you can take small steps toward the pose without trying to do the full position. For example, your version of Handstand could be putting your hands on the floor and walking your feet up the wall. As you get stronger, steadier, and more confident, you can try lifting one leg at a time toward the ceiling. Eventually, you may find that you're prepared to tackle the full pose.

REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT. Instead of holding a pose for a long time, do it briefly but move in and out of it frequently in a single practice session. With a difficult asana like Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose), this strategy can help you find opening and ease.

CREATE A SUPPORTIVE SEQUENCE. This can consist of just a few poses, or you can develop a lengthy series that helps prepare your body for a pose you struggle with. You may be able to design such a sequence yourself, or you can get them from yoga books, videos, DVDs, *Yoga Journal* articles, or workshops that focus on a particular pose or category of poses. If you do take a class that happens to focus on your most troublesome pose or

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seems to make it more accessible, make sure to write down the sequence immediately after class. You can also ask a teacher to help you piece together a sequence that's tailored exactly for you.

IMPROVE YOUR ALIGNMENT. Ask your teacher for feedback about your alignment too. You may be surprised to discover how much easier a pose becomes once you improve your alignment. Even if that doesn't happen, it's important to learn proper align-

ment so you don't fall into bad habits, overworking the places that are already strong or flexible and underworking those that are weak or tight.

BUDDY UP. Practicing with a friend often creates a relaxed, informal atmosphere that makes the whole experience easier and more fun. And having the moral support of a yoga partner can encourage you to be a bit more daring than usual.

CULTIVATE PLAYFULNESS. Bringing curiosity, lightness, and self-acceptance into your practice can have a huge impact. Just as Baron Baptiste did with Garudasana (*see opposite page*), make peace with the poses that frustrate you rather than fighting to master them.

POSES WE LOVE

As you confront your resistance and fears, finding new ways to tackle previously hated poses, you'll discover the exhilaration and empowerment that come from facing difficulty. But remember that you're only human; taking on more than one or two hard poses at once can be frustrating and might even discourage you from practicing. So be sure to include your favorites as well. Try starting and ending your practice with your most beloved poses, and use them as tiny treats throughout your sequence. After all, these are still the poses that are most likely to lure you to your mat and provide you with the relaxing, comforting, and even joyful experiences that are as much a part of yoga practice as the challenges are. ■

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Baron Baptiste on

GARUDASANA

(Eagle Pose)

I struggled with Garudasana for years. I always had difficulty with the finishing act of wrapping my free foot around the standing ankle. There would be times when I could do it effortlessly, but other times I'd really have to work at it, which would often throw me off-balance. And it would really frustrate me to be in a group practice and see other practitioners who could do it so effortlessly. I had a lot of internal turmoil about the fact that I couldn't get the pose "right."

But a few years back, I experienced a breakthrough with Garudasana, and this breakthrough wasn't physical, it was emotional—even spiritual. I just made peace with it. I started noticing that my emotions surrounding the pose were actually throwing me off-balance, so I stopped doing that finishing act; I gave up feeling that I needed to achieve anything in the posture.

I still include Garudasana in my practice, but I'm no longer working toward "accomplishing" it—or any other particular pose. I could probably do the classic, final form of Garudasana if I made that the focus of a practice session, using hip openers, lunge variations, Pigeon Pose variations, and even backbends to release my hips and pelvis. But these days, I focus my practice more on the movement of energy than on some physical outcome. My practice is a purification—a cleaning of the slate—so when I go into the rest of my life, I'm more at peace with things.