

## DHARMA YOGA LESSON

# Forward Bending Postures



It is needed to move the joints a little every day. In reality, *Asana*, the third limb of the eight-limbed Yoga out-lined by Maharishi Patanjali in the Yoga-Sutras, is a preparation. for Yoga Practice. When Yogis sat down to meditate and discover the true nature of everything in days of old, they found that the body grew stiff and the resulting discomfort disturbed their minds. This led them to develop the physical exercises – the Yoga Asanas. Many of us have

By Sri Yogi Dharma Mittra

difficulty sitting for periods of time on the floor in meditation, but I have been offering students the opportunity with the right direction to also practice and taste meditation while holding postures longer in the Hare Pose, Headstand, Shoulderstand and Plough. The *Asanas* also help us to find *Tapas*: acceptance of pain and difficulties as a means of purification. Forward bending poses, when practiced with determination and surrender in equal measure, can take us much of the way toward settling the mind into silence. On the level of the physical, forward bends have the effect of calming the nerves, and stretching and lengthening many of the areas of the body that are often shortened and tensed by sitting in chairs, stress and physical activities like running. As part of one's daily practice of *Asana*, it is recommended that one always include a forward bending pose. They should be done after the body is already warm, and directly following the holy family of Headstand, Shoulderstand and Fish, and just before back bends and spinal-twists.

*Paschimottanasana* or the Back Stretch is a seated forward bend that is accessible

to most practitioners. Its name means: "stretch of the west side of the body posture". In the context of this posture, this means the entire back of the body. Seated on the floor with the legs stretched out in front of you, inhale and raise the arms overhead with the fingers altogether, extended, and the palms facing one another. Exhale and gracefully bow forward. If possible, take hold of the heels and place the elbows on the floor. Close the eyes and bring the attention to the base of the spine. If the chest and thighs aren't together because the body is stiff or because the belly gets in the way, simply bend the knees until you find good contact between the upper body and the thighs. This ensures that you are forward bending with a straight spine. Let the head rest forward, against the shins if possible, and breathe deeply for a long time. To release the pose, extend the arms and inhale up to a vertical position. Then, exhale and bring the arms forward and down to the sides. If your body is very flexible, you may be able, in the full expression of the posture, to reach beyond the feet and grasp the right wrist, bringing the right hand into

*Jnana Mudra*. To form *Jnana Mudra*, make a circle with the thumb and index fingers and extend the remaining three fingers until they are together and straight. Another nice variation is to grasp the big toes with the index, middle fingers and thumbs while extending the elbows to the sides and down to the ground.

Seated postures are beneficial in that the body is fully supported by the floor beneath and can release as one mentally directs the breath thru the spine with ease in concentration. It is also possible to find this release standing when bending forward in *Uttanasana* or Forward Bend. Use the same strategies of bending the knees and holding onto an area of your legs to find your way into a deeper expression of *Uttanasana*.

*Kurmasana* or Tortoise Pose is another wonderful seated forward bend. According to the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, *Kurmasana* is the best pose for finding *Pratyahara* or sensory withdrawal -- the fifth limb of eight-limbed or Astanga Yoga. From a seated position on the floor, bend the knees a little and take the feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. Inhale

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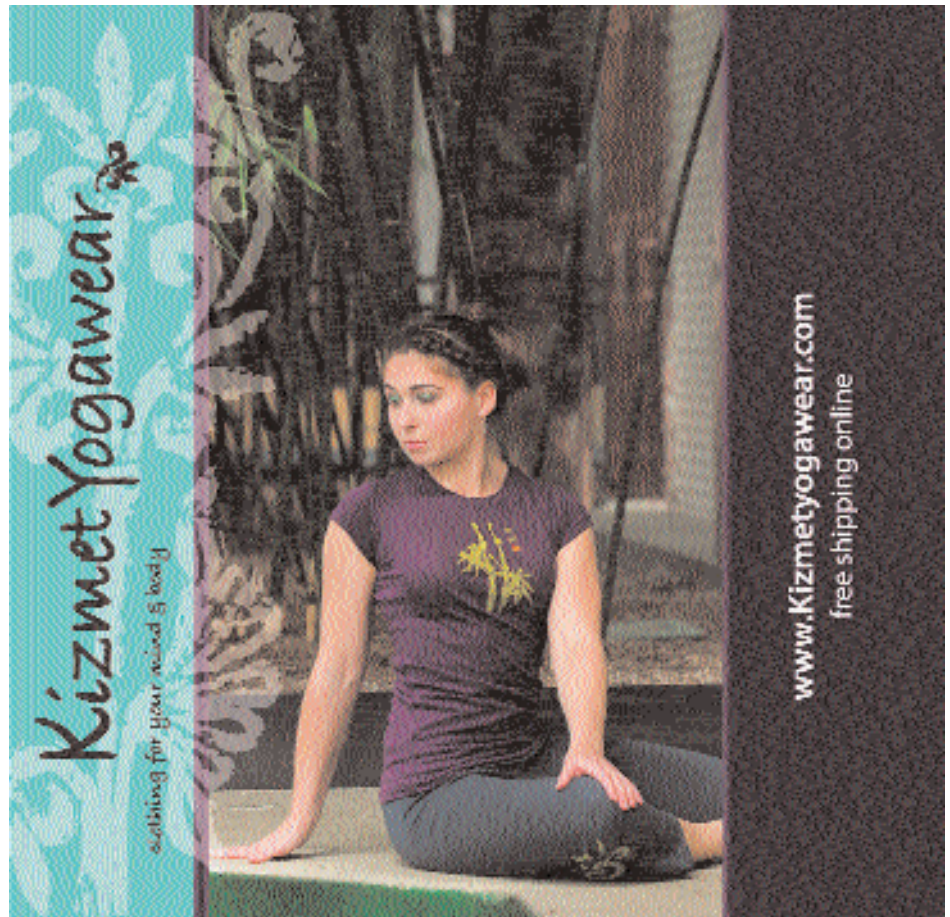
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and extend the arms overhead with the elbows straight and the fingers altogether, extended, and the palms facing one another. Exhale forward, slip the arms under the legs and grasp the heels from the outside, moving the torso down and forward as much as possible. Then move the heels forward as far as you can along the floor, close the eyes, and bring the attention to the space between the eyebrows. Breathe slowly and evenly, and try to remain in the posture for a long time. If the shoulders are flexible, bring the arms back toward the seat with the elbows straight and the palms facing down on the floor. Keep straightening the knees until the forehead rests on the floor. If viewed from above, the arms and legs will be in right angles relative to each other in the bodies of most people. If this is easy for you, place the chin and the chest on the floor, working with compassion to eventually rest the belly on the floor. Don't let the legs get too wide apart — if the knees and shoulders are together, it's a wonderful preparation for *Yoganidrasana*. Also, if the body is flexible, a nice variation is to hook the fingers together at the lower back — a variation and preparation for standing *Tittibhasana*. Keep breathing evenly and gently, and rest in *Kurmasana*.

With the steady, regular practice of the Yoga Asanas, the body becomes healthy, and purification takes place on both the gross and subtle levels. As radiant health becomes the norm, it has an effect on everything — the mind in particular. Always remember that the exercises are simply that, and without keeping the ethical rules, it is not Yoga. When you become firmly established in compassion for all beings, you begin to recognize your own Self in everyone and everything. Then, with the great blessing of a true teacher, or Guru to guide you, you are on the path of Yoga, which is Self-Realization. With divine blessings for your success *Om Shanti, Shanti, Shantih*, Dharma Mittra.

*Sri Yogi Dharma Mittra, now 71, "the teacher's teacher", has disseminated divine knowledge of the self in Yogic philosophy to hundreds of thousands of students for half a century. He teaches regularly at his schools, Dharma East at 297 Third Ave (23rd St.), and Dharma West at 61 West 23rd St. Visit on line at: www.dharmayogacenter.com.*



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