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Intermediate Junior II Level Practice

July 2018

Sequence created & modeled by: Christina Sible, Intermediate Junior II CIYT, of Pittsburgh, PA

Photos by: Sara Azarius



Christina Sible has been teaching Iyengar method yoga for 16 years. She is certified at the Intermediate Junior II level and teaches full-time at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Pittsburgh. (<https://iyengaryogapittsburgh.org/christina-sible>) Her primary teachers include Sara Azarius, Lois Steinberg, Dean Learner, and Manouso Manos. She has studied with Geeta Iyengar, Abhijata Iyengar, and many senior Iyengar teachers at the 2001, 2004, 2007, 2013, and 2016 Iyengar National Conventions. Christina worked in the restaurant industry for 20 years and now serves up her practical, detailed teaching style for the Pittsburgh community.

Urdhva Dhanurasana

When practicing multiple backbends in succession, it is easy to over-stimulate the organs of perception, the *jnanendriyas*. The skin, eyes, tongue, inner ears and olfactory tissues should be kept receptive. The organs of action are called the *karmendriyas*. The arms and legs are the *karmendriyas* directly involved in asana practice. In backbends the arms and legs should be used artfully and to their fullest to construct a base of support and stability for the spine and torso to be mobile and the *jnanendriyas* to be kept receptive. To maintain steadiness in your body and ease in your nervous system, use the legs and arms dynamically to support the lift and arch of your spine. Keep your breath steady and smooth while checking in often to re-relax any tension that comes to the facial muscles, throat, jaw, and eyes. This will ensure that you cultivate the rajasic qualities of the back extensions without agitation, fatigue, or overheating.

Approximate Time: 45-60 minutes

Props required: Mat, 3 Bricks, 2 Bolsters, 3-4 Blankets, Chair, Belt

The first three postures awaken the arms and legs. These organs of action, the *karmendriyas*, support the torso and spine to be receptive, spacious and mobile in backbends. Here are introduced the arm and leg actions that will be carried through most of the back extensions.

Tadasana with Urdhva Hastasana arms

Mountain Pose with Hands Overhead

1-minute hold



- Stand in *Tadasana* with your thighs firm. Spread the backs of your thighs and the sub-gluteal crease apart to broaden the low back while taking the middle of your buttocks down to lengthen your low back.
- Take your arms to *Urdhva Hastasana*. Firm your triceps to straighten your elbows while reaching the arms up and back.
- Spread your shoulder blades apart while rolling the triceps forward and in to broaden your upper back.
- Keep your breath steady and smooth to create ease in the nervous system and senses of perception (*jynanendriyas*) while maintaining firmness and stability in the arms and the legs, the organs of action (*karmendriyas*).

Adho Mukha Svanasana

Downward Facing Dog Pose

1-minute hold

- From hands and knees, spread your fingers wide and anchor down through your knuckles and inner edge of your hands. Keep the inner hands, wrists and forearms rolling in as you firm



the triceps and roll the upper arms out and shoulder blades away from the ears.

- Maintain the arm actions as you tuck the toes, lift the hips, and come up into *Adho Mukha Svanasana*.
- Re-press your hands into the floor for leverage as you extend the hips up and back, making your spinal column and sides of the trunk long.
- Firm the thighs to straighten your knees. Energetically move tops of the thighs, middle thighs, and base of the thighs straight back to further elongate the spine. Deepen the fold at the front of the ankle as you extend the sole of the foot from front to back, placing the heel on the floor while the toes lengthen forward.
- Maintaining all arm and leg actions, spread the backs of the thighs apart.

Salamba Sirsasana I

Headstand

3-5 minutes

- From hands and knees, place interlocked fingers and forearms on a folded mat, with the elbows shoulder width. Elongate the wrists as you seal the outer hand, outer wrist, and outer forearm to the floor.
- Place the back of your head into the hands and anchor the crown of your head onto the floor. Press down through this base of the pose to lift your shoulders and shoulder blades while taking the dorsal spine forward into the body.
- Maintain the above actions as you tuck your toes and lift your hips. As you walk the feet in toward your head, lift the sitbones and inner thighs to create further lift.
- Come up into *Sirsasana*. Re-establish the press of the base of the pose to create a dynamic upward lift of the rest of the body.



- Turn your triceps in as you broaden the shoulders and draw the dorsal spine further forward into your body. Engage the shoulder blades forward into the chest for even more support.
- Draw the middle buttocks forward into the body and up to the ceiling while spreading apart the backs of the thighs and subgluteal crease.
- With firm, straight legs, energetically reach the legs up. As you extend the inner line of the leg and inner foot to the ceiling, pin the outer ankles and outer thighs inward to create compactness and stability.

The following four poses begin to prepare the arms, legs and spine for *Urdhva Dhanurasana*.

In these four poses (with the exception of *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana*) the knees are bent, and the arms are well extended behind the body to cultivate a *rajasic* quality of energized mobility in the chest and spinal column.

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

Upward Facing Dog Pose

2-3x, 30-45 seconds each



- Lie prone on your mat. Have your feet hip width and the hands in line with the base of ribs (wrists and elbows at a right angle).
- Point the big toes straight back, pinning the outer ankles in.
- As you engage your middle buttocks into the body and extend your buttocks toward the heels, spread the backs of the thighs and sub-gluteal crease apart to create broadness in the low back.
- Press down through your knuckles and inner hands as you roll your triceps toward one another to broaden the collarbones and spread open your chest.
- Maintain the above actions as you press your hands and tops of your feet into the floor to raise the body up. Turn triceps in/biceps out to take the shoulders back as the dorsal spine comes forward. Roll the armpits from back to front and bottom to top. Press the inner hands to lift and spread your collarbones as you spread and descend your shoulder blades. Engage the shoulder blades forward to support the lift and opening of the chest.
- Coil your spine forward into the body as the legs continue to reach and extend. Maintain a smooth, relaxed breath as you work. Keep the eyes, throat, jaw and facial muscles soft and passive.

Dhanurasana

Bow Pose

2-3x, 30-45 seconds each



- After completing *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana*, rest for a moment, lying prone. Then repeat buttock and front thigh actions from the previous pose. Maintain these actions as you bend the knees and catch your ankles.
- Firm your triceps as you turn them toward one another to spread and open your chest. As you engage the shoulder blades forward into the body, roll the armpits from back to front and bottom to top. Draw the dorsal spine forward and up.
- Press your pubis and middle buttocks down as you raise your arms and legs up and back. Press your shins and ankles back into your hands to create a taught, bow-like action.
- Keep your neck and head following the line of your spine.
- Keep the knees hip width by re-rolling the hamstrings and base of the buttocks from center to the sides.
- Maintain firmness and sharpness in the arms and legs while maintaining equanimity and calmness in the facial muscles and nervous system

Ustrasana

Camel Pose

2-3x, 30-45 seconds each

- Kneel on the mat, placing a blanket or folding the mat if needed, for cushioning. Place the knees and feet hip width apart. As you point the big toes straight back, pin your outer ankles in. Press down through your shins and ankles.
- Keep the outer ankles pinning in and outer shins pressing down, as you roll the fronts of the thighs in, backs of the thighs and sub-gluteal crease out. Keep the inner groins rolling back as you take the hands to the upper buttocks flesh and extend it toward the floor.



- As you take the middle buttocks into the body and down toward the floor, press the shins down and raise the chest up. Coil your spine into the body as you raise the dorsal spine to the sternum. Engage the shoulder blades into the back body to support the lift of your chest.
- Bring the fingertips to the heels (or to a bolster over the heels, if needed) maintaining the lift of the chest. Turn your triceps in and biceps out while moving the armpits from back to front, and bottom to top, to support the ascension of the chest.
- Make a connection between the shins pressing down and the top of the sternum lifting up.
- To come out with an open chest, lean slightly back first, then press down through the shins for momentum to come up.

Chatushpadasana

Four Footed Pose

3x, 30-45 seconds each



- Lie down with your back body on the mat but your head on the floor or a very thin blanket. Bend your knees, bringing the heels to the buttocks (or as close as possible). Pin your outer ankles in, rolling the outer thighs to the ceiling, inner thighs to the floor.
- Press down through your inner feet to raise the hips up. Interlock your fingers behind you. Roll your outer shoulders down and underneath you to come onto the tops of the shoulders. Press the upper arms, forearms and wrists down to create an upward lift in the spine. Engage the shoulder blades into the back body to lift the armpits and support the lift of your chest.
- Connect down through the heels and inner feet to create lift in the middle buttocks and tailbone. Maintain this lift as you re-



roll the outer thighs to the ceiling, inner thighs to the floor. Come down and rest.

- For the second cycle, repeat the above actions, but this time place the hands underneath of the feet, palms up.
- For the third cycle, repeat the above actions, but catch the fronts of your ankles (or use the belt across the fronts of the ankles, if needed). While pressing the arms down, to create further lift through the body, pull on the fronts of the ankles to engage the shoulder blades into the sternum and create more broadness and spread through the chest.

The following poses cultivate calm in the nervous system and create greater space in the front thighs, hips, armpits and chest for *Urdhva Dhanurasana*. These allow stiffer students the benefit of getting into the opening actions required for *Urdhva Dhanurasana*.

If desired, these poses can be placed earlier in the sequence (between *Salamba Sirsasana* and *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana*). This is a nice option for tighter students that need to do more prep work before starting any active back extensions.

Alternatively, they can be placed later in the sequence (immediately after *Urdhva Dhanurasana*) for students who may want to do all of the active work straight through and have more time after *Urdhva Dhanurasana* to quiet the nervous system. This is a nice option for students who find they are overstimulated after backbends.

***Setubandha Sarvangasana* on brick**

Bridge Pose

2-3 minutes



- Place a brick on the highest height under the sacrum. Roll the shoulders well underneath.
- Interlock your fingers to roll the shoulders further under your body. Connect the wrists and forearms down to create more lift in the spine.
- Extend the legs (may press the feet to a wall if available) reaching through your heels and inner feet. Pin the outer ankles in as you roll fronts of your thighs in and backs of the thighs apart. Keep the facial muscles soft and jaw and throat relaxed.

***Paryankasana* with support**

30 seconds-1 minute, each arm cross



Fig (i)

- Sit in *Virasana* (Hero Pose). Adjust buttocks up and back, seeing that you are sitting toward the front of the sit bones and subgluteal crease.

(If unable to sit on the floor in *Virasana*, you may place a low block, wedge, or blanket under buttocks.)

- Place your hands by your sides. Press into the floor to coil your spine into the body. Engage the shoulder blades into the chest to lift and open the front of the trunk. See *Fig(i)*.
- Maintain the lifted position of the spine as you place the dorsal spine on the brick. Allow the head to hang, using support under the head if necessary for neck issues. Catch the elbows with your fingertips. Roll the triceps in and biceps out to broaden the upper back.



Fig (ii)



Fig (iii)

- Take *Baddha Hastasana* arms overhead. Press the forearms in to the bolster and/or blanket support to create an upward lift of the chest.
- Continue to press the forearms down to lift the sternum up as you press the shins and sit bones down to lift and arch the lumbar spine. After 30-60 seconds switch the arms cross and repeat. See *Fig (ii)*.
- Raise the arms and take your hands on the floor by your sides. Press hands, shins and sit bones down to provide stability as you come up with an open chest.
- After releasing *Baddha Hastasana* arms, move the bolster out of the way, and proceed to catch the sides of the mat, bringing your elbows to a right angle, if possible. Turn your triceps in and the biceps out to broaden your upper back. See *Fig (iii)*.
- Release the catch of the mat.



Fig (iv)

- Firm your triceps to straighten the elbows and extend your arms. Press the sit bones down as you reach your arms back and down. Maintain the spread of the scapula and softness in your throat and neck. See *Fig (iv)*.

Supta Virasana

Reclined Hero Pose

2-3 minutes



- From *Virasana* (still there from *Paryankasana*), extend your buttocks toward the backs of the knees as you lie back to a bolster or to the floor.
- Extend the quadriceps toward the knees as you take the arms overhead and reach the triceps away from the head to create length through the spinal column.
- Spread the backs of your shoulders apart and bring your dorsal spine into the body.

Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana

30 seconds-1 minute per arm variation



Fig(i)



Fig(ii)

- Place a chair (with the back of the chair facing the wall) a few feet from the wall. Place a folded mat on the seat of the chair. Carefully step into the chair, lying back and taking your buttocks off of the chair, shoulder blades on the chair to start.
- Press your hands into the back rungs of the chair as you slide back, allowing the mat to traction the skin of your upper back and buttocks toward the wall in order to open the chest. See *Fig(i)*.
- Once the bottom tips of the scapula have cleared the seat of the chair, catch the sides of the chair and pull down through the hands to coil the spine and roll open your chest. Roll your armpits from back to front and bottom to top. With legs straight or bent (this will depend on your height and flexibility) press through your heels and the inner line of your legs and feet to pin your outer ankles in. See *Fig(ii)*.



Fig (iii)



Fig(iv)

- Take your arms inside the front and back legs of the chair, turn the palms out if you are able, and catch the back legs of the chair, taking the hands as low as they can go. Pull the fingertips around the legs of the chair to coil the spine further around the seat of the chair and draw your shoulder blades and dorsal spine into the chest. See *Fig(iii)*.
- Maintain the coiling action of the spine as you re-activate the legs to have a strong dynamic between the upper and lower body.
- Release the arms from the back of the chair and extend them toward the ceiling. Firm your triceps to straighten your elbows as your roll the triceps in and biceps out. Maintaining the firmness and roll of your arms, bring them overhead. Dynamically reach the firm arms and legs away from one another.
- Fully straighten the legs at this time (use blocks under your heels if needed.) Roll the backs of the shoulders apart to broaden the upper back and the re-pin your outer ankles in to maintain the broadness of the low back as they reach in opposition to create length through the whole body. See *Fig(iv)*.
- To come out, bend your knees and slide back a bit more until buttocks are completely on the chair. Place your elbows on the seat of the chair. Press your heels, buttocks and elbows down to come up with an open chest, bringing the head up last. Sit for a moment with a neutral spine.
- Stay in the chair to proceed directly to *Urdhva Dhanurasana* pushing up from the chair.

You may use blocks against the wall and under the hands if needed due to stiffness or injury. If such is the case, carefully exit the chair and setup near the wall.

Urdhva Dhanurasana

Upward Bow Pose

3x each variation, 30 second -1 minute each cycle



- Lie back on the chair, repeating the tractioning steps from *Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana*. Have bent knees and bent elbows initially, feet/knees should be hip width and hands/elbows should be shoulder width. Pin outer ankles in as you spread the backs of your thighs apart. Press through your inner hands and pin your outer elbows in, rolling your triceps in and biceps out. Maintain the broadness of the upper and lower back as you push up into the pose. Firm your triceps to straighten your arms. Re-press the inner edges of your hands into the floor or blocks to lift and engage your shoulder blades into the back body to support the lift of the chest and dorsal spine. Re-press your inner feet into the floor as you spread the hamstrings and lower buttocks apart. As you activate the *karmendriyas* (organs of action, in this case your arms and legs), soften the *jnanendriyas* (in this case the eyes, throat and jaw), in order to calm and steady your nervous system.
- To come out, repeat the steps for exiting the pose presented in the previous posture (*Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana*). Carefully exit the chair.



- For the next variation, stack 2 bolsters. Again, use blocks against the wall and under the hands if needed because of stiffness or injury. Lie down, placing the hands on the blocks or the floor. Repeat all actions from the previous variation as you push up into the pose.



- After 3 cycles, remove one bolster and push up from there, if possible, cultivating all actions presented in the first variation.



- Practitioners that are able can lie flat on the floor and push up classically. Lie supine, placing the hands under your shoulders (or the sides of the head, if less mobile in the shoulders and upper back) and heels touching the buttocks, hip width (or if less mobile, as close to the buttocks as is reasonable). Pin in the outer ankles and triceps.
- Keep the inner feet and inner hands pressing as you push up onto the top of your head. Take a moment here to recover your breath and soften your facial muscles. Re-roll the triceps and fronts of your thighs in. Connect your hands and feet strongly into the floor to lift your body into the pose. Make a connection between your arms and legs rooting down into the floor and the spine lifting toward the ceiling.
- Firm your triceps to straighten the elbows. Engage the shoulder blades (especially the bottom tips) up into your chest to further lift your dorsal spine and sternum. Maintain the spread of your back thighs to keep the low back lengthened. Stay steady in the arms and legs as you exhale to come down.

The following four poses are being used to quiet the mind, to soften and lengthen the back body, and to calm the nervous system after the stimulating, rajasic effect of multiple, activating back extensions.

Salamba Sarvangasana I

Shoulder Balance

3-5 minutes



- Neatly stack 3-4 blankets for Shoulder Balance, having a bolster or bricks under the sacrum. If using bricks, place them side by side, perpendicular to the blankets. (wrinkle in mat accidental)
- Come into *Sarvangasana*. Descend your upper arms into the floor and take your armpits from back to front as you draw your dorsal spine into the body and up toward the ceiling.
- Firm your legs and take your middle buttocks forward and up as you stretch your legs up and back. Maintaining the firmness of the middle buttocks, spread the backs of your thighs and sub-gluteal creases laterally. Pin your outer ankles in as you reach up through your inner feet and heels.
- Soften your eyes, jaw, and throat. Bring your awareness to the cooling effects of *Sarvangasana*, as the posture counterbalances the heat and activation of the back extensions.
- To prepare for the next pose, walk your hands as low down your back and as close to one another as you can.
- If using bricks, place them side by side, perpendicular to the blankets

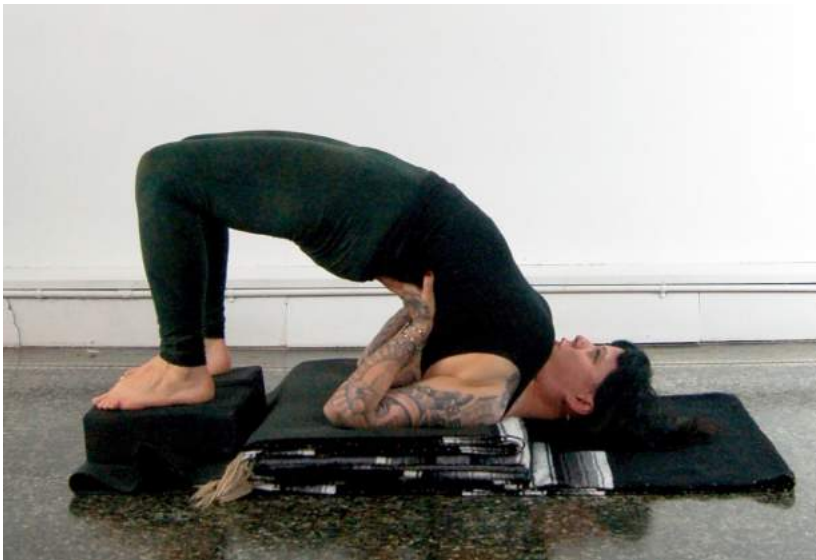
Setubandha Sarvangasana, dropping back from Salamba Sarvangasana

(Drop back to the wall or chair if unable to drop directly to the floor) 30 seconds-1 minute

- Maintain the base of the pose and lift of your spine as you bend your knees, bringing your buttocks toward your heels.



- Just before dropping back: re-engage your middle buttocks and tailbone strongly forward into your body and reach your knees toward the ceiling as you reach your feet toward the floor.
- To drop back: swiftly open your chest forward and lift your tailbone up as you drop your legs back and down. Once landed, press your inner feet down to raise your tailbone up, and spread of the backs of the thighs.



- Press your upper arms down to further lift the spine, shoulder blades and chest. Remain firm and dynamic in your arms and legs but soft and receptive in the eyes and throat.
- To come out, release your arms, lower your hips and lie flat for a few moments.

Bharadvajasana I

Pose dedicated to the Sage *Bharadvaja*

1 minute each side



- Place enough folded blanket height underneath your right buttock to make your hips square and level. From *Dandasana* (Staff pose), sweep your legs to the left. See that your right thigh is parallel to the edge of the mat and your right foot is beneath and perpendicular to the left foot which is pointing straight back as in *Virasana*.
- Descend your left buttock, drawing the left sit bone back and down as you turn to the right.
- Place the right hand on the blankets, floor, or brick behind you as you place the back of your left hand on your outer right thigh.
- Sweep your abdomen from left to right, skin of the back from right to left as you twist.
- Continue to descend your left buttock as you roll your shoulders back to lift your chest and draw your dorsal spine in and up.
- Turn to look over your right shoulder.
- Soften and lengthen the back muscles. Soften your breath.
- Repeat to the left.

Bharadvajasana on the bolster

3 minutes each side



- Open a thin blanket to have padding for your ankles. Sit in *Dandasana* with your right hip against the short edge of the bolster. See that the back of your hips and the long edge of the bolster line up.
- Sweep your legs to the left, placing your left ankle in the cradle of your right arch. Place your hands on the floor and use the leverage of your hands to turn your chest and abdomen deeply to the right. Place the center of your chest on the bolster, turning the head to the right if able, to the left if less flexible in the twist. Fully relax your arms, shoulders and legs.

- After 3 minutes, repeat to the left.

Low Back Savasana with the chair

Corpse Pose

5-10minutes



- Place a blanket on the seat of the chair. Lie down with the backs of your calves fully supported.
- Rest your arms at your sides, palms up, and visualize your back-body softening, lengthening and broadening as you observe your breathing.

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