

Beyond Duality

From that [effortlessness in asana and fixing the mind on the infinite], [one attains] freedom from the dvandvas (pairs of opposites). Tato dvandvanabhighatah; — Yoga Sutra 2.48

By Sandra Anderson



Our world is defined by sensory experience. The pleasures and pains of life can be all-engrossing—dominating our lives and consuming our time and energy. Yoga tells us the sensory world is characterized by pairs of opposites (*dvandvas*): heat and cold, light and dark, male and female, positive and negative, honor and insult, success and failure. As long as we are caught swinging between these poles, we are unaware of the pure consciousness which underlies them both. This sutra, the third in a triad of verses on asana from the *Yoga Sutra*, suggests a way to escape the teeter-totter of mundane experience, opening the door to a more subtle level of awareness.

The dichotomies inherent in our experience of the world are hardwired into our nervous systems. To transcend ordinary consciousness, we need to stabilize and balance both our bodies and our mental and emotional states—and this is the promise of yoga practice. The yogis recognized the play of opposites in the body as the flow of energy alternating between two core channels that manifest in the physical body as the spinal column. The regulation of that flow is centered in the “command center,” the *ajna chakra*, with its physical manifestation, the brain. They further described the pair of channels as solar and lunar energies, and recognized a third, more central channel that is active when the other two are transcended—the *sushumna nadi*. The verses on asana in the *Yoga Sutra* explain that a peaceful, dvandva-free mind (resulting from the activation of the third channel) is the fruit of a steady, comfortable, effortless asana, and the fixing of the mind on the infinite.

The practices of hatha yoga manipulate energy flow in the three channels, first through asana practice, and then by working with the breath—its quality, rate, and patterns. In asana practice we can tangibly explore energy shifts in the body. We can use opposing isometric actions to enliven a pose; we can work against gravity to expand the space of the body; we can asymmetrically work one side of the body at a time. By inviting the play of opposites into practice, we consciously experience how embracing opposing actions stabilizes and activates the power of yoga.

A Balancing Act: Balancing postures are the most obvious place to begin our study of the *dvandvas* in asana. The balancing postures highlight our efforts to keep upright in opposition to

the fundamental polarizing force of gravity. They teach us inner stability, fearlessness, and quiet self-confidence.



Padangusthasana (big toe pose): Stand with the feet parallel under the hip joints. Feel your weight centered over the arches of the feet—rather than thrown back on the heels, forward over the toes, or rolling to the inner or outer edges of the soles.

Bend the left knee, holding the back of the thigh with the left hand. You may stay in this position (good for tight hamstrings), or straighten the leg, grasping either the big toe (the classic position), or the outside of the foot (a little easier). Keep the standing leg straight and firm, but not rigid or locked. Your weight should be centered over the arch of the standing foot. Press the foot into the floor while lifting up through the crown of the head. Draw the thigh toward the torso while pressing the torso forward. This action will elongate and energize the center axis. Notice that if you work too hard in one direction or the other, you will destabilize or deactivate the pose. Refine your balance and sensitivity to the inner alignment of the pose, then repeat on the other side.



Vrikshasana (tree pose): Start standing as before. Rotate the right thigh open and bring the right foot to the inner left thigh. The key actions for the legs and pelvis are to press the inner thigh into the foot as well as the foot to the inner thigh. Then press the right knee back and the sacrum forward, and the left foot into the floor, as you lift up through the center of the torso. Now press the hands together in front of the heart center. (Don't rest the hands on the body.) Lift the elbows to bring the forearms parallel to the floor and press the hands together strongly to draw the shoulder blades down the back, broaden the collar bones, open the heart and throat centers, and lift through the crown of the head. If all goes well, you'll feel rooted and inwardly focused, and you won't have to shift from side to side looking for balance. Practice on both sides and notice how subtle the breath becomes and how the mind quiets.

Up and Down, In and Out

Making the right effort in opposing directions stabilizes your asana, creates an inner space, and invites the mind to rest there—unaffected by the constantly changing external world.



Utkatasana (chair pose): From a neutral standing position, bend the knees and drop the pelvis as you stretch the arms out to the side and up alongside the ears. This pose creates a powerful upward-expanding energy precisely by dropping the weight of the body down through the legs and pelvis. The trick is to deepen the bend in the knees, ankles, and hips, and then to keep drawing the torso back toward the vertical axis, countering the natural forward lean of the squat. Find a balance between the forward lean and the drawing back, and work as strongly as you can in both directions. Keep the weight over the feet, with the inner thighs rolled down and the spine neutral. (Flatten the lumbar spine if you tend to arch, and lift the sit bones to create a slight curve if you tend toward a flat low back.) Draw the arms back and stretch them up away from the feet and toward the sides of the head.



Uttanasana (standing forward bend): With the feet parallel and hip distance apart, soften or bend the knees and fold forward from the hip creases, resting the fingertips on the floor or a block. Center the weight over the arches of the feet. Now simultaneously press the balls of the big toes and the outer edges of the heels into the floor. If you balance the effort in these two opposing directions, you'll feel the bottoms of the feet spreading, the thigh bones rolling in as the outer hips draw back, the sit bones lifting as the lower back broadens and lengthens downward, and the whole spine lengthening away from the pelvis. Draw the shoulder blades toward the waist and release the neck and jaw as you reach the crown of the head toward the floor, completing the opening of the inner body in this forward bend of the outer body.

Hold this pose and find balance between engaging and relaxing your effort. Sense how the body is anchored into the earth through the feet, feeling heavy yet light and spacious at the same time. This embracing of opposites frees us from the limited experience of one or the other. It also creates stability and comfort, and then space for concentration—a settling of the dissipated mind that typically swings from one experience to the next.

Clearing Inner Space

Vajra yogini mudra (thunderbolt seal): This hatha yoga practice strongly clears all the energy channels in the body, and by activating the solar and lunar channels, awakens the third, central channel, sushumna, characterized by the equal flow of breath in both nostrils. When sushumna is active, the mind is disengaged from the senses, balanced, and free from the influence of the dvandvas.

This is an advanced practice; if you're not experienced in pranayama, try *nadi shodhanam*, or alternate nostril breathing, instead. Also, please note that there is a long list of contraindications for this practice: colds or pronounced congestion, any disturbances of the eyes or ears such as glaucoma, high blood pressure, and any other condition that would be aggravated by increased pressure in the head. If you feel uncomfortable pressure in the head, or light-headed or dizzy, stop and breathe normally, or lie down and rest.



Mild Version: Sitting on your heels in *vajrasana* (thunderbolt pose), interlace the fingers behind the back. Exhale and bend forward from the hip joints, bringing the forehead to the floor. Lift the clasped hands overhead toward the floor. Keep the arms lifted and inhale as you come up to sitting. Then release the arms, close the right nostril with the right thumb, and contract the abdomen to

exhale completely and strongly through the left nostril. Inhale deeply through both nostrils, close the left nostril with the right ring finger and exhale through the right nostril.

Repeat the whole exercise, with the first exhalation on the right side this time. Breathe as deeply as possible, and control the breath through the navel center, contracting the abdomen strongly on the exhalation. Repeat the exercise a third time, exhaling first on the left side.

Strong Version: As before, exhale folding forward. Contracting the pelvic floor in mulabandha, inhale deeply in this position; retain the breath, clasp the hands, and lift the arms overhead to create further pressure; then lengthen the torso and come up with a straight spine while holding the breath in and keeping the pelvic floor contracted. You'll feel a lot of pressure all the way from the pelvic floor to the chest and head. Inhale a little more if you have room.

Then close the right nostril and exhale very strongly, squeezing the lower belly to force out every ounce of breath. Inhale deeply through both nostrils, close the left side, and exhale strongly on the right. Be careful not to irritate the delicate tissues of the nose, and stop if you feel light-headed, dizzy, spacey, or irritated. Take a couple of resting breaths, and then repeat twice more, alternating sides for the initial exhalation. Then relax and sit quietly. Let the breath be spontaneous, relaxed, slow, and smooth. Feel the touch of the breath in the nostrils. You may now want to do a round of nadi shodhanam, or continue with breath awareness meditation.

Yoga International *senior editor Sandra Anderson is co-author of Yoga: Mastering the Basics and has taught yoga and meditation for over 25 years.*

Photos by Kathryn LeSoine; Model: Crystal Ketterhagen