

## Deciphering Yoga Pose Names

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By the time you've taken your first yoga classes you are likely to have heard some Sanskrit words, even if it's just the greeting *namaste* from the teacher, maybe a long *om* to finish the class, or that sweet relief of *śavāsana*. The names for yoga poses almost all end in *āsana*, which originally just meant 'seat', but has come to mean 'pose'. The rest of the name can be a single word, like an animal, or it can be a longer phrase. Let's have a look at a few examples:

Animal pose names are usually simple but imaginative: *Bhujāṅga*, snake or serpent, gives us *bhujāṅgāsana*, cobra pose. *Uṣṭra*, camel, gives us *uṣṭrāsana*, camel pose. You may also recognise poses named after *bheka* – frog, *garuḍa* – eagle, *kapota* – pigeon, *matsya* – fish, *mayūra* – peacock, *śalabha* – locust, *svāna* – dog, *vṛścika* – scorpion, and *tittibha* – firefly. The word used for 'cat' in cat pose is a fun one: *mārjāra* literally means 'one that cleans itself'. Another you may be familiar with is the arm balance 'crow pose', usually called *bakāsana*. But *baka* actually means 'crane', while the word for 'crow' is *kāka*. Plants are also sometimes used, as in *padma* – lotus, *vṛkṣa* – tree, and *daṇḍa* – stick or staff.

Other poses use directions or shapes, such as *adho* – downward, *dhanu* – bow, *koṇa* – angle, *parivṛtta* – revolved or twisted, *parśva* – side, *prasārita* – wide stance, *sālamba* – supported, *supta* – supine or reclining, *tāna* – extended, *tulā* – balance, *ubhaya* – both or together, *upaviṣṭha* – seated, *ūrdhva* – upward, *uttāna* – intense stretch, straight or extended, and *utthita* – extended or standing. Then we have body parts, such as *aṅga* – limb, *aṅguṣṭha* – big toe or thumb, *hasta* – hand, *janu* – knee, *mukha* – face, *pāda* – foot, and *śīrṣa* – head. But how many body parts or angles? Usually in yoga we focus on *ardha* – half, *eka* – one, *dvi* – two, *tri* – three, *catur* – four, or *aṣṭa* – eight.

Now we can see how some common pose names are constructed:

- *tri* + *koṇa* + *āsana* gives us *trikoṇāsana*, triangle pose
- *adho* + *mukha* + *svāna* + *āsana* gives us *adhomukhaśvānāsana*, downward facing dog
- *catur* + *aṅga* + *daṇḍa* + *āsana*, gives us *caturaṅgadaṇḍāsana*, four-limbed staff pose
- *utthita* + *hasta* + *pāda* + *aṅguṣṭha* + *āsana*, gives us *utthitahastapādāṅguṣṭhāsana*, standing big toe hold. And that's why you'll rarely hear the Sanskrit for that one!

Try reconstructing the names of some other poses from the words already given.

Some poses are simply named after famous sages, such as Marichi, giving us *marichyāsana* (seated twist), Vasiṣṭha, giving us *vasiṣṭhāsana* (side plank), Viśvāmitra, giving us *Viśvāmitrāsana*, and Kauṇḍinya, giving us *kauṇḍinyāsana* (sometimes spelled koundinyāsana). Aṣṭāvakra is an interesting case of a sage whose name is a compound meaning 'eight-bends or angles' reflecting the physical disabilities he apparently had in his limbs. From his name we get *aṣṭāvakraśana*, eight-angled pose.

Another great name is *naṭarājāsana* – dancer's pose. Naṭarāja refers to Śiva in his form as the cosmic dancer surrounded by a ring of flames. *Vīrabhadrāsana* (warrior's pose), a staple of modern yoga classes, is made up of *vīra* – hero, and *bhadra* – great or distinguished.

Lastly, *utkaṭa*, which gives us *utkaṭāsana*, means fierce, mighty or powerful. Normally in English we call it ‘chair pose’, or sometimes ‘fierce pose’. The Sanskrit is much richer, since an *utkaṭa*, can also mean an elephant in rut, and more specifically, the fluid dripping from its temples when it’s in rut. So next time your teacher is holding you in ‘chair pose’ for too long, and the sweat is dripping from your temples, instead of imagining a boring chair, try visualising the power of a horny elephant!

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