

YOGA ★ for WARRIORS

BASIC TRAINING IN STRENGTH, RESILIENCE
& PEACE OF MIND

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sounds true
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CHAPTER 3

BUILD THE FIRE

SUN SALUTATIONS

Yoga had its origins in India, and as in most ancient and indigenous cultures, the sun held a central place in the life and thought of that early civilization. For thousands of years, the day began—all over the planet—with the worship of the sun. Many of our ancestors in ancient cultures such as the Mayans, Incas, Aztecs, Native Americans, Eskimos, Druids, Romans, Greeks, and most likely dozens of others, had sun temples and sun deities. The sun was the symbol of the great light that the human soul longed to find—whether consciously or not—within. Just think about the importance of the sun in our own culture. For starters, without it, we wouldn't be here. The sun gives life to everything we know, we have, we eat, we breathe.

So it is no surprise that a short sequence of movements called the sun salutation (*surya namaskar* in Sanskrit, which translates to “reverence to the sun”) is the way most yoga asana methods begin their practice. There really isn't a better way to start. The sun salutation does a really good job of warming up the body for a strong asana practice. It serves as

a foundation for the subsequent postures, and is just about a complete workout in itself, as it loosens and heats up every joint and corner of the body.

The sun salutations can be modified to accommodate almost anything—a broken leg, a torn rotator cuff, osteoarthritis in a hip, an amputated limb, a hip or knee replacement, a variety of shoulder injuries, sprained or broken ankles, back injuries, or confinement to a wheelchair. They have been used by people of all ages, by all types of athletes, and by people with all kinds of limitations and restrictions. We just tune in to what we are able to do, and then develop a modified program that will work for us. The great thing is that, without exception, everyone can do the breathing! And once we begin to breathe and move and pay attention to what we are doing, the mind begins to quiet, and the symptoms of anxiety, panic attacks, depression, or PTS will begin to subside little by little.

PREPARATION FOR ASANA PRACTICE

The ways we prepare for and enter our yoga practice can determine how powerfully it works for us. Here are several things to keep in mind as you enter the practice.

Eating

To prepare for the practice of the yoga postures presented in this book, it is best not to eat anything, or at the very most, a light snack like toast or an apple or banana, for at least three hours before beginning.

Hydrating

It is also important to be well hydrated going into the practice. Try to drink at least sixteen to twenty-four ounces of water thirty minutes before practice, and then again after practice to rehydrate your body. Unless you forget to drink plenty of

water before you start your practice, you don't really want to drink water or other liquids during practice. Remember, you are trying to build a fire, and what happens when you pour water on a fire? It goes out! Drink beforehand and keep the fire burning while you practice.

Clothing

For ease of movement, wear comfortable workout clothing designed for yoga practice. Nothing too tight but nothing too baggy either, as it will get in your way and possibly be more revealing than you would like.

Flooring

It is ideal to practice barefoot on a clean wood, tile, cement, or bamboo floor using a nonslip yoga mat or just on the floor itself. Do not use anything that will slide around (like a towel or blanket) for a mat, unless you need something under your spine for some of the floor work. In that case, put the towel or small, flat cotton rug on top of the nonslip mat.

Cleanliness

The body and clothes should be clean. You might notice in the first four to six weeks of your asana practice that there may be some unusually strong, strange odors emanating from your body. The asanas are squeezing out toxins and tension (some very old and deeply rooted) and cleansing the cells and organs in ways that sports activities often don't. But after you have been practicing for a month or so, and if you are following a fairly clean and healthy diet, you will notice that your sweat no longer has much of an odor. The whole process of doing asana is about purification, so you want to be clean, pure, and without odor, especially if you are in a class situation. Remember "clean" has no odor, so slathering yourself with synthetically scented lotions, potions, deodorants, soaps,

and shampoos is not the same thing and can make others in class sick. No scented anything—just clean!

Distraction

If you are practicing on your own at home, pick a space where you are least likely to be distracted or dismayed. The more neutral the space, the more likely you will be able to feel content with the moment and attentive to the activities of your inner being. Distractions are part of life, and whether they are internal or external, as you learn to focus and direct your attention in your practice, they will bother you less and become less attractive. Eventually, you will be able to let the interfering thought pass and won't be drawn in by external sight or sound. But sometimes a distraction is just too big to ignore. If you become distracted or interrupted, and it is guaranteed that you will many times, *simply notice that you have been distracted*. This is the critical moment. This is when you take hold of your attention, let go of the thought or the distraction, and pull your attention back to your breath. Every time you are able to do this, you become stronger in your resolve to stay grounded and present, and you become healthier and less susceptible to being distracted by sounds, sensations, or painful (or pleasant) memories.

Room Temperature

No air conditioning—being cool may be *cool* but as far as temperature goes, it defeats the whole purpose of the practice. If you don't like sweating, this yoga may not be for you. If you can't sweat for medical reasons, then work easy and breathe easy.

Sweating

Hopefully, by the time you finish doing the repetitions, you will have broken into a sweat. That's the idea. The particular

system of asana practice described in this book is what is called a form of *tapas*, or detoxification. The word *tapas* means “to burn.” The idea is that you use the work to start an internal fire, which then burns impurities and clears toxins—both physiological and psychological—from the body through squeezing, sweating, and breathing.

Generally, we associate sweating with huffing and puffing and working hard. In yoga, we learn to work hard, but also to work smart. The breath is even, powerful, and controlled, not panting. The heart rate is even and steady, not pounding. We are statically contracting muscles and focusing on those contractions; remember, although you will be stretching, this isn’t a stretch class. As we move into postures and hold those positions, we are consciously contracting the muscles opposing the stretch. This will make sense once you start to practice. Those strong, conscious, *static* contractions that happen in stillness are different from the *dynamic* contractions of moving a limb through a range of motion, like lifting or running or biking. The static contractions, along with the ujjayi breathing, help to keep the sweating mechanism turned on and wring the toxins out of the muscles, ligaments, and tendons, as well as out of the brain!

SUN SALUTATION (POSITIONS 1–9)

The sun salutation we are going to work with here is a sequence of nine positions, and each position or movement flows from one to the next. It is performed, once learned, as a fluid sort of dance, with one breath accompanying each move, and is generally repeated several times. The idea is to use this work to warm up for the rest of your practice.



FIGURE 3.1

Mountain Posture

Mountain Posture

Stand at the front of your yoga mat with your feet together and with your arms at your sides. (If that is not possible for reasons of balance or discomfort, then make sure your feet are at least parallel. Press your feet into the earth and feel the earth supporting you. Imagine you can feel energy coming up from the earth through your feet, all the way up through your hips, shoulders, and out the top of your head. Mother Earth—here, now—has your back. It’s a good feeling. Make it a good feeling. Level your pelvis, by dropping your tailbone. Pull your belly in, tighten your thigh muscles, and lift your chest bone (the sternum). Take a moment to focus your eyes on a point in front of you: pick a little spot and look at it. Try to hold this gazing point for a moment or two. Begin the ujjayi breathing. Take a moment to settle in and actually *be there*.

This is mountain posture, or it could be called attention position. (See figure 3.1.) You will begin and end your practice in this position and frequently return to it between most of the standing postures for the entire standing sequence.

FIGURE 3.2
Sun Salutation,
Position 1

Position 1 Mountain Posture with Arms Up

Inhale and raise your arms up over your head, placing the palms together (if possible). Look up. Lift the knee caps by tightening or flexing the thighs (quadriceps). Reach up as strongly as possible, lengthening the torso and lifting the rib cage. Don't arch the back or lean back.

Note: If you have neck issues or it feels painful to look up, then look straight ahead. Stand straight up and down. Keep your belly pulled in and your tailbone lowered. When *contracting*, or *tightening*, your thigh muscle, be careful not to hyperextend the knees; you can soften the knees slightly and still contract the thighs. This lifting of the quadriceps is what I explained earlier as a *static contraction*—a tightening of a muscle without an accompanying movement in the associated limb. A static contraction is the “hard” or tightened aspect of the posture. It takes energy and requires fuel to accomplish. Thus it creates heat. Static contractions are an extremely important element of the practice and are a key component of generating heat, keeping the fire going, and keeping the sweating mechanism turned on during the practice. This procedure of static contraction will be referred to frequently throughout the book.



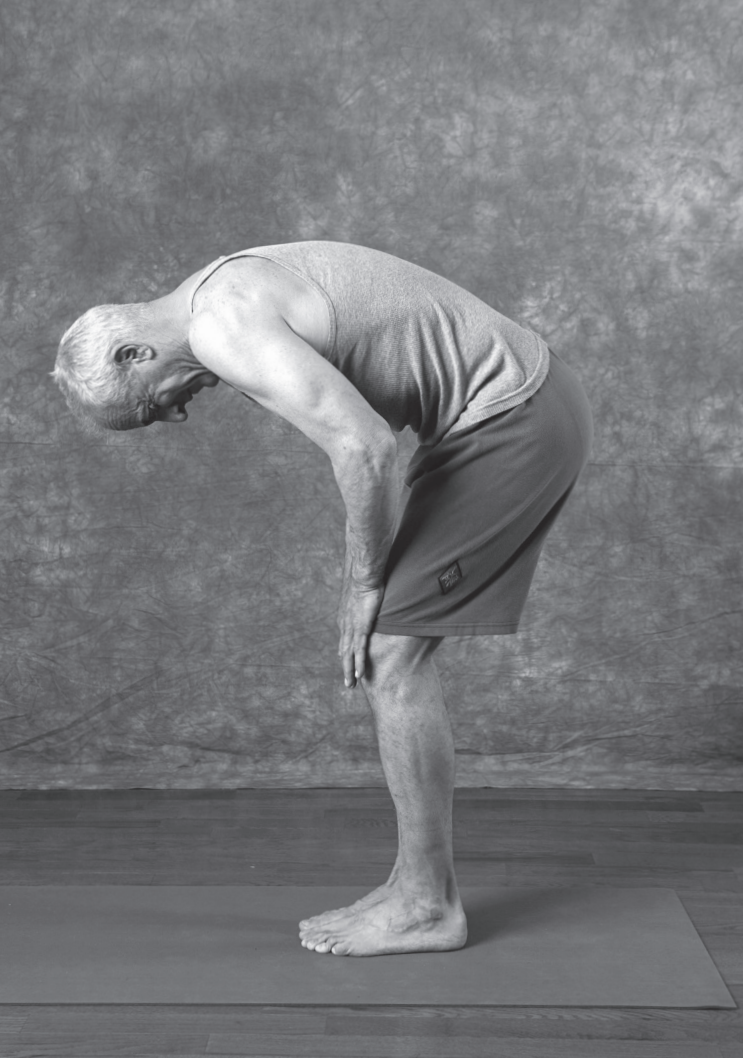


FIGURE 3.3 Sun Salutation, Position 2

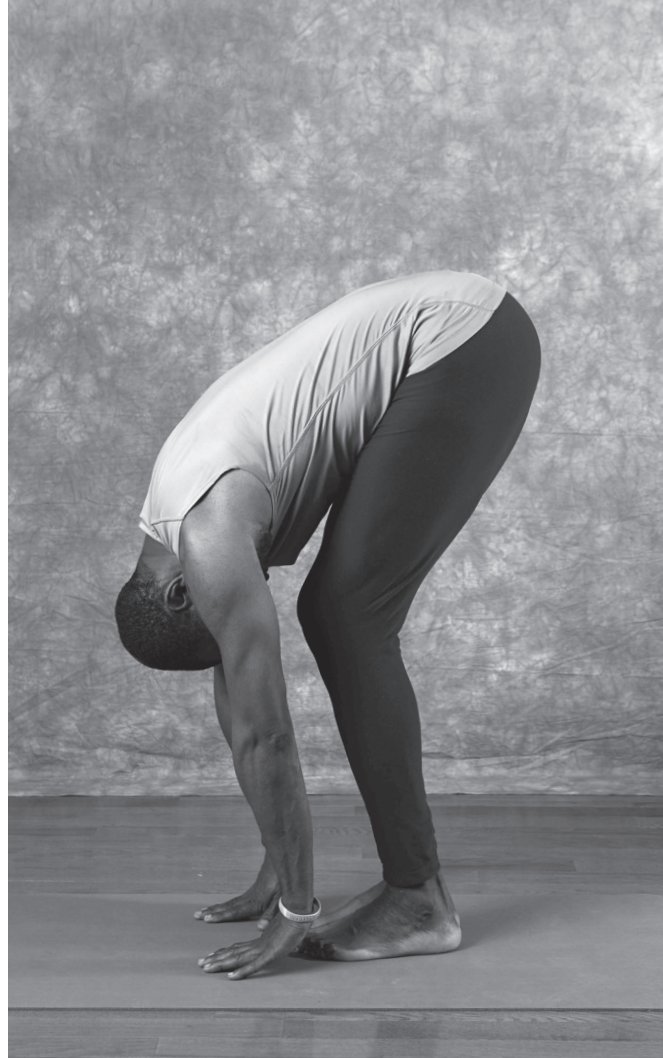
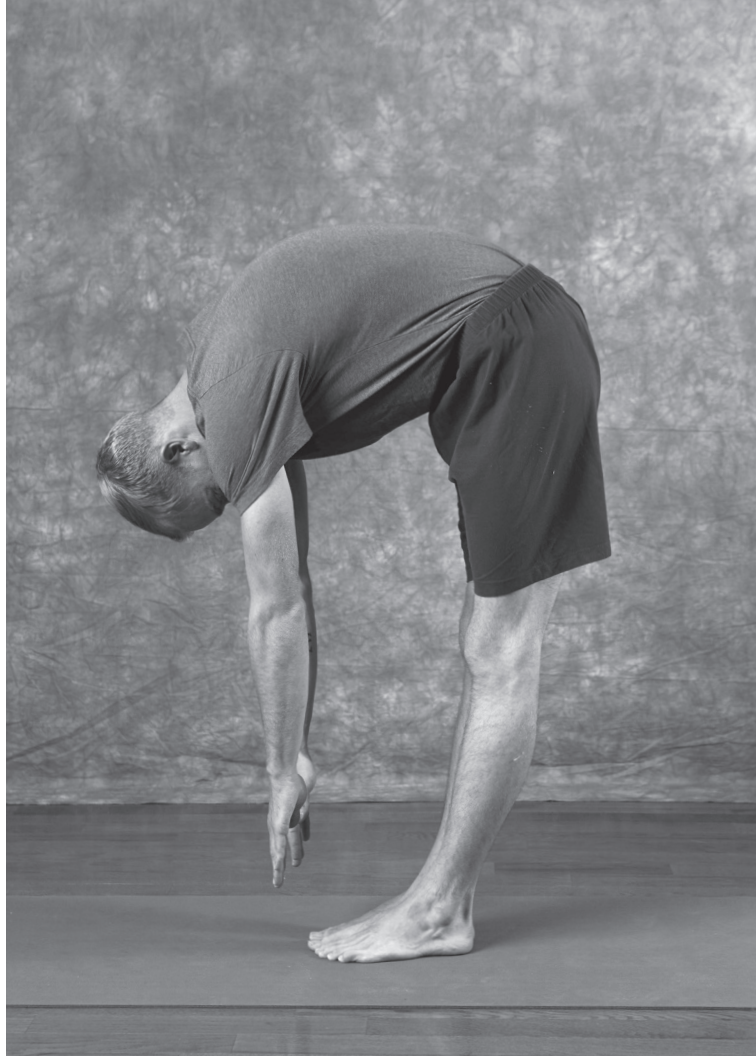


FIGURE 3.4 Sun Salutation, Position 2, Advanced

Position 2 Standing Forward Bending Posture

Exhale, bend forward, bend your knees, and place your hands on your knees (see figure 3.3 or 3.4). Tuck your nose into your knees. If you are really flexible, you can take your hands all the way to the floor for this position. (See the following note as well as figure 3.4.)



Note: In figure 3.5, it is easy to see in the model, who is a runner and has very tight hamstrings, how stressful standing forward bending can be on the lower and middle back. If you look like this when you bend over, and cannot easily touch your toes, then it is critically important that you bend your knees and place your hands on your knees and not try to reach the floor.

FIGURE 3.5 Sun Salutation, Position 2, Incorrect

Note: Before taking this posture, consider whether you have tight hamstrings, lower-back pain, or any kind of low-back injury. If you do, it is really important to bend your knees as you bend over and that you do *not* try and take your hands all the way to the floor. Standing forward bends attempted with straight legs can be contraindicated and dangerous if the hamstrings are very tight and/or there are lower back issues!



FIGURE 3.6 Sun Salutation, Position 3

Position 3 Standing Forward Bending Posture, Head Up

Inhale, lift your chest, extend your spine, and look up, keeping your hands on your knees (or the floor).

Position 4

Four Limb Stick Posture

Exhale, place your hands on the floor (bending the knees as needed to do so) on either side of your feet, step all the way back, and come into a straight or plank position. (If your hands are already on the floor, just step back to the plank position.

Inhale again, and then exhale and lower your torso into a push-up position (figure 3.8), hovering above the floor, if possible. (If not, just lower yourself all the way to the floor or just lower your knees, as in figure 3.9, slowly building arm strength over the weeks of practice).

Note: Keep your torso steel-straight and your elbows tucked into your sides. Keep your shoulders level with your butt and your elbows. Don't let your butt sag, but don't stick it up in the air either. Think *plank*. If you are strong enough to hold a push-up without sagging in your hips, then you can do this with straight legs; but if you are not, you can modify this posture by lowering your knees to the floor. Keep your head in line with your spine. Gaze straight in front of you.

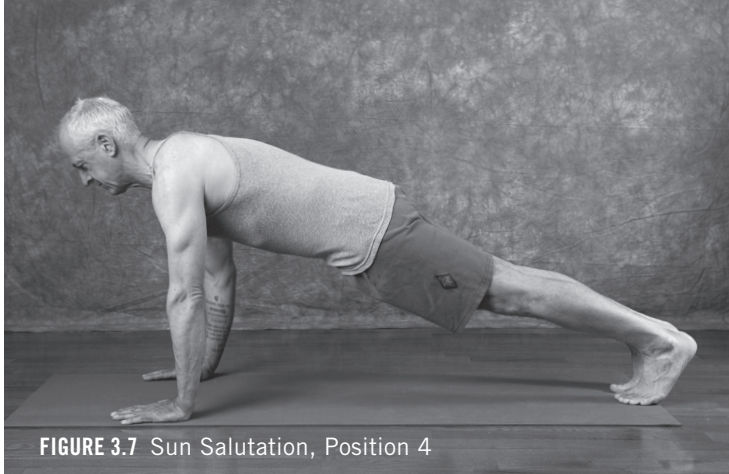


FIGURE 3.7 Sun Salutation, Position 4

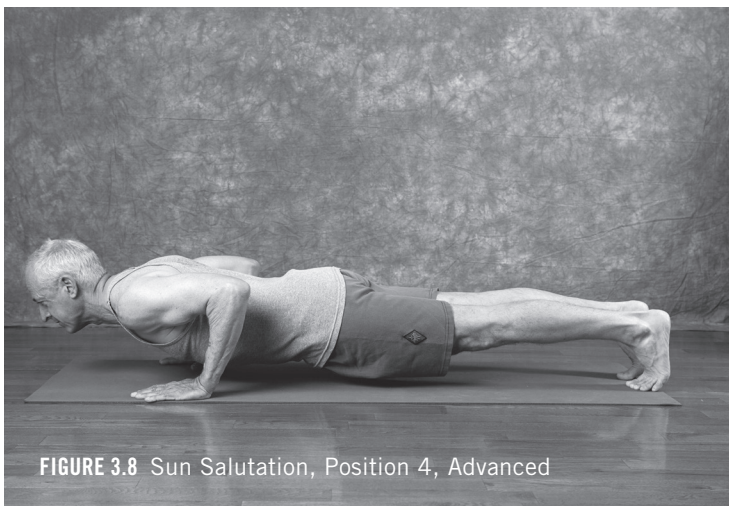


FIGURE 3.8 Sun Salutation, Position 4, Advanced

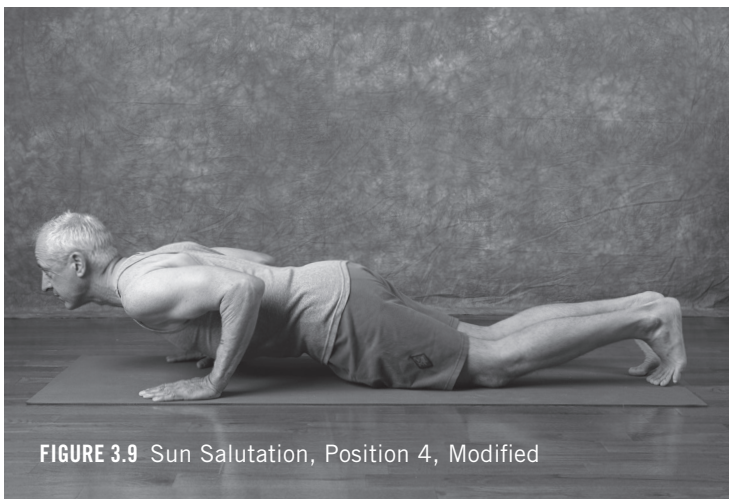


FIGURE 3.9 Sun Salutation, Position 4, Modified