

Sequence for Kurmasana I

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There are so many ways to approach each asana, both in terms of sequencing and in terms of general focus. That is, how do we prepare the body for a given asana, and what do we hold in our mind as we practice? I offer one sequence to prepare for Kurmasana (tortoise pose), but two different intentions for the sequence. The first intention is to cultivate equanimity (*upeksanam*) in the mind by equalizing effort in each asana between actions involving the arms, and those involving the legs. This implies and requires a deep connectivity (*anvaya*) between the arms and legs. The second intention is to cultivate an inward-turning awareness (*antar angam cittasya*) by firming the periphery of the body. These can, of course, both be cultivated at the same time, but limiting at first the focus to one or the other can make each more accessible. Changing the focus this way also reveals deeper layers of the being that lie beneath the change. See Yoga Sutra III.15 for details (*krama anyatvam parinama anyatve hetuh*). Here is the sequence:

1. Ardha Uttanasana to Uttanasana: connect outer upper arms to sides of chest, then connect arm actions to leg actions
2. Adho mukha svanasana
3. Parsvottanasana
4. Utthita hasta padangusthasana, with support of wall. Use belt as needed.
5. Utthita parsva hasta padangusthasana, with support of wall.
6. Parivrtta utthita hasta padangusthasana, with support of wall.
7. Utthita hasta padangusthasana, balancing, classic if possible (catching foot with both hands)
8. Uttanasana
9. Prasarita padottanasana
10. Eka pada sirsasana (inversion)
11. Malasana II, then Malasana I
12. Akarna dhanurasana I
13. Dwi hasta bhujasana
14. Upavista konasana
15. Kurmasana I
16. Salamba sarvangasana → eka pada sarvangasana → supta konasana → halasana
17. Savasana

The actions to carry through the sequence are, in addition to those appropriate for each asana:

- arm actions to connect the arms to sides of chest
- leg actions that connect to the spine
- link the leg actions to arm actions to equalize effort in arms and legs.

Ardha Uttanasana to Uttanasana:

- Start with a concave back, arms straight, looking forward.
- Grip triceps back and inwardly towards centerline of body to press shoulder blades into the back.
- Keeping this action, move biceps forward and spread them out to move and expand front and side ribs forward.

- Now make these two arm actions equal in effort.
 - The effort is subjectively equal, not necessarily measurably equal, and part of the mind knows there is a difference. But the subjective evenness of effort is enough to trigger mental calmness (*prasanta vahita*: “calm flow”, Sutra III.10).
- Now for the legs: press roots of big toes and inner heels, then take outer shins back towards calves to firm and stabilize outer hips.
- Without becoming light on inner edges of feet, press outer edges of feet and take inner groins back.
 - Finding evenness in these two actions not only lengthens the spine, but it fosters connectedness (*anvaya*) between the actions in the lower body and those of upper body.
 - Cultivating evenness between the leg and arm actions now associates the calm flow of awareness with the entire body.
- Now, maintaining the evenness and awareness of its impact on the mind, bend the elbows and release the head to come to Uttanasana.

Each asana in the sequence may be approached the same way, adapting the focus on connectivity to the additional actions specific to each pose.

As I taught this sequence with Kurmasana the intended ‘target’ pose, it is appropriate to give a few more details for Kurmasana.

- The inner groins have been lengthened in Utthita Parsva Hasta Padangusthasana, Akarna Dhanurasana, Dwi Hasta Bhujasana, and Malasana;
- Hips have been prepared for the simultaneous flexion and abduction in Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana, Upavista Konasana, Akarna Dhanurasana, Dwi Hasta Bhujasana, and Malasana;
- Lumbar spine has been lengthened in Adho Mukha Svanasana, Parivrtta Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana, and Malasana;
- Upper back and shoulders have been prepared for Kurmasana with Adho Mukha Svanasana, Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (classic pose), Eka Pada Sirsasana and Dwi Hasta Bhujasana.

Kurmasana I:

- Sit in Dandasana near front of mat, take feet apart the width of mat, and bend the knees.
 - Turning to the left, take your right arm under your right knee and hold your outer right foot.
 - Now turn to the right and take your left arm under your left knee and hold the outer left foot.
- Pulling on your feet, lengthen the anterior spine by taking your chest forward.
 - Extend the arms farther under and pause.
 - While pausing, adjust your shoulder blades down and into your back.
- Keeping the shoulder blades moving down and into the back, press the backs of knees against backs of armpits, and extend the heels forward.
 - Extend through inner edges of feet (c.f. Uttanasana) and firm the outer hips and thighs.

- Extend through outer edges of feet and soften the inner groins.
- Keeping the outer hips firm and inner groins soft, drag your heels forward to extend the legs.
- Keep the outer edges of feet lifting, and the heels moving straight ahead (instead of letting them spread farther apart). As you extend the legs, spread the chest and extend the arms farther apart.
- If you are new to Kurmasana, then move only a couple of inches at a time, and in between movements of the feet, adjust your hands forward so they are always in line with shoulders.
- During the pauses, let go of any effort not needed to maintain the shape and stability of the asana.
- During the entry into Kurmasana, and in your final pose, find evenness (equality) in the effort you exert in the arms and legs.

Second Intention: now the actions in the arms and legs are to create firmness and a sense of boundedness in the periphery of the body. In Uttanasana, wrap the triceps in, not with the circular sense of the rotation in mind, but with the narrowing of the outer arms in mind. Use this arm action to create a narrowing in the outer ribs toward the center line of the body. Roll the biceps out—not with the circular aspect in mind, but with the horizontal spreading in mind, and connect that with the horizontal expansion of the interior of the chest. So now the mind is naturally drawn inwardly and can maintain an inward focus. Similar actions in the legs deepen this inward focus: squeeze outer shins, outer thighs and outer hips toward center of body; spread inner ankles, inner thighs and inner groins. Carry this inward focus throughout the sequence for Kurmasana I.

Aim to become stable with the inward focus, as well as the quality of connection, such that these qualities become the new substrate upon which to refine further. This shift is what gradually leads to effortlessness in the effort to perform asana (*prayatna saithilya*, from Sutra II.47).