

Warrior I: Root to Rise

For this week's pose, I chose Warrior 1 (Virabhadrasana 1). First, as part of the popular Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskar B), it follows last week's pose, Downward-facing Dog. Reason two is that, as common as it is seen in many "all levels" sequences, it is a complex pose that deserves deeper inspection. In other words, this pose comes with both philosophical and alignment mythology. We'll begin with the first, the philosophical mythology and the important quality of root to rise.

The Story

Like the "dog poses", warriors are popular teaching protagonists in the Bhagavad Gita as well as many other Hindu epics. Some might find the use of warriors contradictory to such philosophies, but the idea warriors represent is not about violent warrior. Rather, they represent the battle of good over evil we all face everyday. Warriors represent the idea of our "higher self" (atman) battling to destroy harmful or violent aspects of our own ego.

In this first story, Virabhadra is the warrior Shiva creates to avenge the death of his beloved wife, Sati (also known as Shakti). Daksha, Sati's father, didn't approve of Sati's marriage to Shiva, and chose not to invite either of them to a huge festival he was hosting. Hurt by her father's snub, Sita decided to stand strong, to remain rooted in her love of Shiva and attend the festival anyway where she planned to confront her father in front of all his friends.

Her resolve was tested when her father, Daksha greeted her with contempt, mocking her husband for his wild look (his hair was a mass of dreadlocks and wore snakes around his waist. Infuriated, Sati's inner fires stoked to an inner raging fire and the crowd screamed as she became a human flame. Shiva ran in just as he saw her flame dissolve into ashes. In a mad rage of anger and sorrow, he pulled out one of his dreadlocks, threw it forcefully to the earth calling forth it to metamorphasize into Virabhadra I, Exalted Warrior. The crowd drew back at the sight of this beautiful but mighty Warrior stood strongly grounded to the earth but with an upward extension of gaze, heart and arms. He was the epitome of strength and courage. The crowd murmured amongst themselves, "What would happen next?! The only thing they knew was this great being had come to right the wrong of Daksha's cruelty

This is a cliff-hanger. Check next week's newsletter to see how this all plays out in my discussion of Warrior II and III. Meanwhile, practice embodying Virabhadrasana I's attitude of of using a strong foundation to support rising up in with courage and self-empowerment.

The Asana

Virabhadrasana I

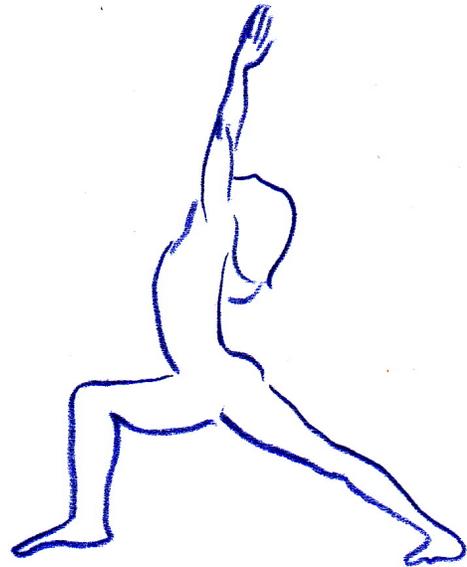
veer-ah-bah-DRAHS-anna

Vira = Hero, Bhadra = Auspicious, Exalted

As I mentioned there is as much mythology about the alignment of this pose as there is about the philosophy.

Myth 1: Square your hips

Generally, we're taught to think of this pose as a "square-hipped" pose in which we are attempting to turn our hips square to the front of the mat. It turns out that this cue and forcing this action in service of this cue, has been the major sources of injury in yogis. Because the back heel is down, that hip cannot square evenly with the other hip. It will always be behind. The problems arising from attempting to square the hips literally rise right on up through the foundation.....from feet, ankles, knees, hips and low back. Although the back femur is moving towards inward rotation, there should remain a lift in the back foot arch and an anchoring of the back outer heel. No joint in the back leg should be feeling a torque. This means, the hips will be slightly turned towards the direction of the back foot. The amount of the back foot's turnout depends on the hip socket shape (compression) and the flexibility of hip muscles (tension). Students should not feel pain and should feel a lift in their back foot arch (not a collapse). To help with this, you can also have students take a wider stance (move feet outward away from each other, towards hip distance apart. Stance should never be front heel to back foot arch.



Many teachers, like Jason Crandell, are advocating we call this pose Warrior 1.5 to avoid the forcing of squaring the hips forward. Remember, from the sacrum through the lumbar spine, there is very little rotation. If we force a squaring of the hips forward we could affect this. So if you cue to allow your torso to face slightly to the direction of the back heel, you'll not torque the sacrum or low back....thus the Warrior 1.5. However, you can also remind students that they CAN turn their thoracic spine more square to the front of the mat. This is perfectly safe if there is no pain.

Myth 2: Turn your back foot out 45 degrees.

As discussed above, this isn't the same for everyone. Listen to your body. Myth 2: Bend your front knee to a square.

Myth 3: Front knee must be a 45 degrees with thigh parallel to floor.

Again, this was a very popular cue when I was first practicing yoga. While this form “looks ideal”, it is not good alignment for everyone and can cause a lot of damage and injury. Those with tight hip flexors might be low back compression and there are a myriad of other issues that can travel from the heel to the hip.

Myth 4: You must lift upward from the hips and never tip forward.

Although we do work towards a retroversion of the low back to prevent low back compression in most cases, some might need keep a slight lean forward of the spine if pain is felt.

Because warrior I is a complex pose, it’s also an exciting opportunity to discover the unique capacity and needs of your own body. Playing with these options in your practice will help you find your own individualized warrior. Happy exploring!

General tips:

- Front knee bends **towards** a 45 degree angle and points over 2nd toe of front knee.
- Pelvic girdle **towards** retroversion (tailbone points to the front knee).
- Lift arches & ankles up
- Press outer heel to floor
- Chest rotates forward
- Tailbone in & down to elongate the back
- Lift out of the base of pelvis
- Abdomen draws towards low back
- Arms are straight & external rotated
- Back of the heart moves to the front of the heart
- Shoulders relax & shoulderblades draw down
- Bottom tip of shoulderblade moves forward, low front ribs draw slightly in

- Center of perineum ascends, lifting the core of the body & the crown of the head
- Tongue, throat, face are relaxed
- Breathe naturally but fully.
- Notes:
The arches of the feet are lifted, connecting with the upward lifting in the pelvic floor, the lower abdomen, rib cage, cervical spine, and the top of the head. The shoulder blades are dropped onto the support of the rib cage and connect with the downward release of the tailbone and the grounding of the points of contact between each foot and the floor.
- Benefits:
Strengthens legs, back, shoulders and arms. Develops strength, stability and stamina in the entire body. Increases flexibility in the front groins, hips, back, and shoulders. Opens chest. Beginning of backbending poses. Strengthens energy in body.
- Contraindications:
Those with high blood pressure, don't take arms overhead. Prenatal after the first trimester, the weight of the abdomen may strain the low back.