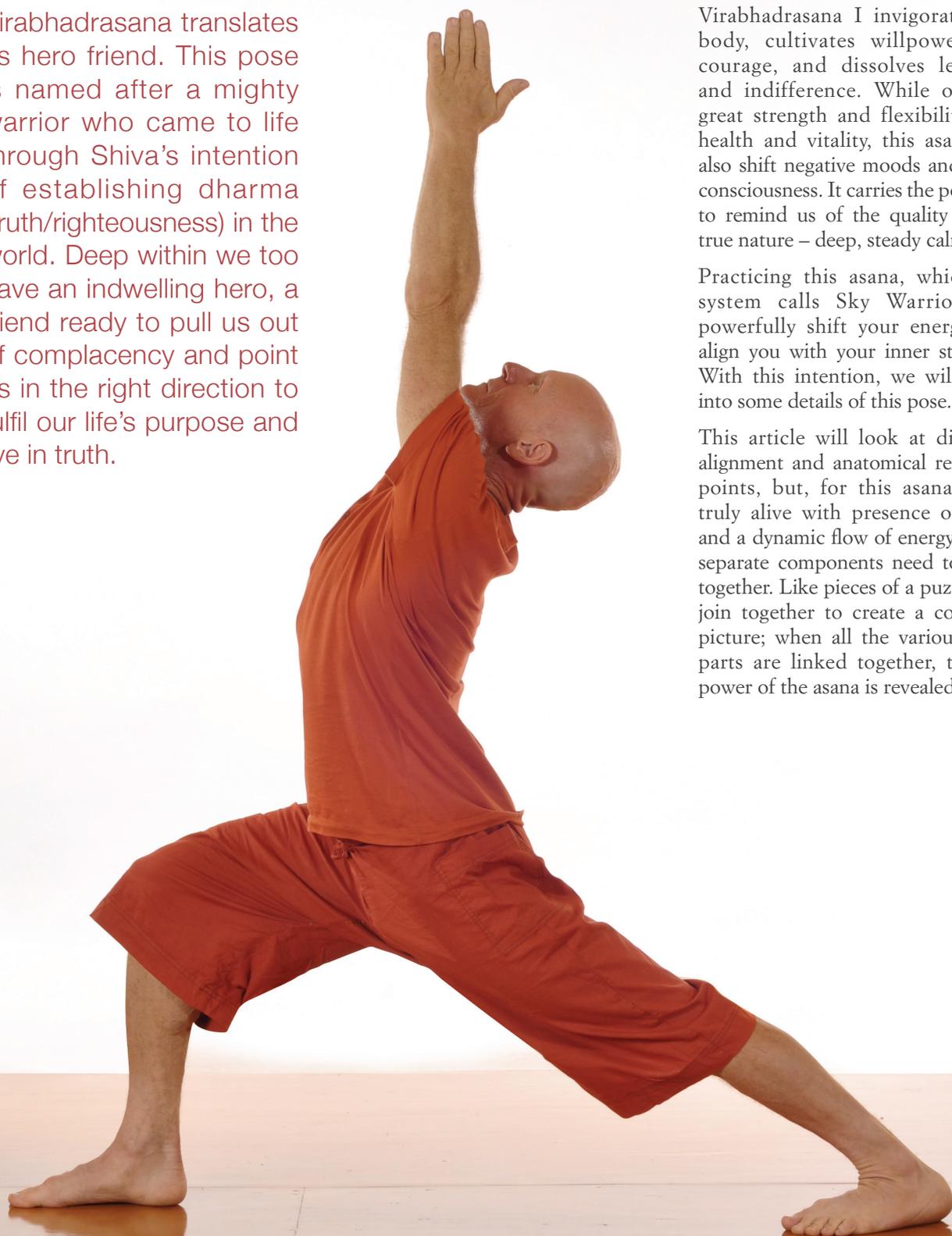


VIRABHADRASANA I

~ Warrior I Pose

Virabhadrasana translates as hero friend. This pose is named after a mighty warrior who came to life through Shiva's intention of establishing dharma (truth/righteousness) in the world. Deep within we too have an indwelling hero, a friend ready to pull us out of complacency and point us in the right direction to fulfil our life's purpose and live in truth.



Virabhadrasana I invigorates the body, cultivates willpower and courage, and dissolves lethargy and indifference. While offering great strength and flexibility plus health and vitality, this asana can also shift negative moods and uplift consciousness. It carries the potential to remind us of the quality of our true nature – deep, steady calmness.

Practicing this asana, which our system calls Sky Warrior, can powerfully shift your energy and align you with your inner strength. With this intention, we will move into some details of this pose.

This article will look at different alignment and anatomical reference points, but, for this asana to be truly alive with presence of mind and a dynamic flow of energy all the separate components need to come together. Like pieces of a puzzle that join together to create a complete picture; when all the various body parts are linked together, the full power of the asana is revealed.

FIND YOUR STANCE

A good way to move into the pose is through Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend). Step back with the left leg into High Lunge. Explore adjusting the width of the stance by shifting your left foot a bit towards the left. Spin the back heel down with the toes pointing approximately 45 to 60 degrees towards the front. If the heel is not anchoring down to the floor, then shorten your stance until you can press the heel down to the floor. The intention is that the hips and shoulders are square toward the front. This will help you avoid any twisting in the spine. With the front leg bent, press the foot down and forward into the floor, and inhale straighten the front leg as you come up to standing. Exhaling and place the hands on the pelvic rim.



IMPORTANT POINT - FEET AND LEGS.

Balance the weight distribution between the two feet. If most of the weight is on the front leg and foot, that knee may be stressed as it carries excess load. To bring more weight bearing into the back leg and foot, press the front foot down and forward into the floor. This works beautifully to transfer weight down the back leg and into the foot. It is the feet and mostly the back foot rooted downward that gives the rebounding force for the breastbone, spine, and arms to reach upward through the field of gravity.

Breathe here. Firm the back leg, toning the front of the thigh (quadriceps) to lift the kneecap. By fully straightening the back leg with muscular strength, the knee is protected from twisting as you turn the hips to face the front. Inhale and lift the chest upward. Exhaling, bend the front knee, keeping the back leg strong and straight. The front leg bends towards a right angle with the knee placed above the heel. Have the kneecap facing toward the middle toe so it doesn't collapse inward. To prepare for holding the pose, you can, as an option, flow into and out of the bent knee position a few times.



FROM EARTH TO SKY

From here, on an exhaling breath tip the torso forward to form a diagonal from the back foot all the way to the crown of the head. Draw the navel in without cutting off your smooth breath flow. Press the front foot down and forward into the floor to anchor the back foot. To emphasise the weight pouring down the back leg into the foot, an option is to bring the arms back alongside the back leg. Spin the upper arm bones in their sockets to externally rotate the arms. With the arms straight you will know this is happening if the palms turn down with the thumbs out to the sides. This arm positioning will prepare for the action of lifting the arms by the ears, which comes next.



Now, sweep the arms by the ears. Include the arms in the diagonal line from back foot to fingertips. Turn the outer armpits towards the front and spin the hands so that the little fingers turn in towards each other. Open the arms wider than shoulder width if your neck and shoulders feel congested and need more space. Exhale and press into the back foot by pressing your front foot down and forward. As you inhale into the chest, lift the arms and spine together to a vertical position. Exhale and maintain the upward lift of the arms.



For new students, or for those with shoulder or spinal restrictions, hold the pose with the arms opened wider than the shoulders. Turn the palms towards each other angling the little fingers slightly inward. This position supports a smooth breath flow.

IMPORTANT POINT - THE SPINE.

Another point is to learn how to take any adverse compression out of the lower spine. In the full pose the spine is in extension, a backbend. While the lumbar spine is definitely participating in the backbend, you do not want to overdo it. Some ways to work with this are to begin the pose in the diagonal position as shown above. Pressing into the back foot as described previously tilts the spine into a diagonal in line with the back leg. Draw the lower ribs in, and as you inhale into the chest area, lift the spine up towards vertical. You can practice this a few times without the arms and then bring the arms into it. The idea is to lead with the breastbone as you take the spine toward vertical. This will draw the backbend up the spine into the thoracic region between the shoulder blades, thereby preventing lumbar compression. Using the arms to dynamically lift upward also serves to take pressure out of the lower back. Lift the chest, and have the arms in a vertical position, not angled backward. This will ensure the lumbar is not being stressed.



To take the pose further, with the breastbone ascending and the arms in a vertical position, the head can be taken back. Releasing the head back to look skyward is initiated by the chest first lifting upward. You can keep the arms shoulder width apart or join the palms pressing them together. Pressing the little finger side of the palms together will externally rotate your shoulders assisting in the lifting of the chest.

With a steady, clear gaze look up through the thumbs towards the sky. Maintain a smooth breath flow. The chest is ascending, the arms are vertical, and your awareness spreads through the entire body. Feel into the legs. Anchoring the back foot, emphasise a sweeping arc upward through the front of the back leg, up through the anterior pelvis, the belly, the chest, and radiating upward through the arms and hands. Your upward gaze contributes to the uplifting movement of energy and awareness. With each inhaling breath, energy ascends; with each exhaling breath, energy descends back into the feet connecting you with the earth.



IMPORTANT POINT – THE BREATH. How you breathe in the pose makes a huge difference in how you can fully experience the power of Virabhadrasana I. Inhale into the chest and ribcage areas feeling them expand. Exhale from the lower belly to the navel. The inhaling breath into the chest region will give internal support for the lifting of the breastbone and the exhaling breath will provide a grounding, stabilising effect.



EAGLE WARRIOR VARIATION

This stronger variation takes the spine into a deeper backbend. With the right foot forward, come into the pose as described above. Inhale the arms out to the sides in a T position and exhale cross the left arm over the right. Bend the elbows and intertwine the arms bringing the palms or back of the hands together. Draw the upper, inner thighs toward each other to initiate mula bandha, the pelvic floor lock. Inhale; lift the chest and elbows upward. Exhale and take the head back looking upward towards the thumbs. You can bring the left thumb towards the forehead. Focus on lifting the elbows and chest together. Be here for a few breaths savouring this deep experience.

CONCLUSION

To enter into the heart of the asana there has to be commitment. Once you have found the stance that works for your body, bring yourself into the experience of the posture with your concentration, focused breath, and a willingness to be transformed by the pose.

Explore the weight distribution between the two feet; try squeezing the feet toward each other, or stretching the floor apart between the feet. Use the strength and power of the lower body to provide an upward lift through the torso and arms.

In Sky Warrior, work on becoming grounded and stable through the legs and feet. From your base of support, use alignment and breath to ascend upward through the

spine and arms. Rise up through gravity, affirming your soul's desire for freedom.

Virabhadrasana I offers an opportunity to embody an important lesson for those on the yogic path: becoming grounded and staying grounded as you expand into your true essential nature. For spiritual growth to be sustainable, it is vital that the yogi begins from a stable base. This can be established through your intention, yoga practices, lifestyle choices, and living the yamas and niyamas.

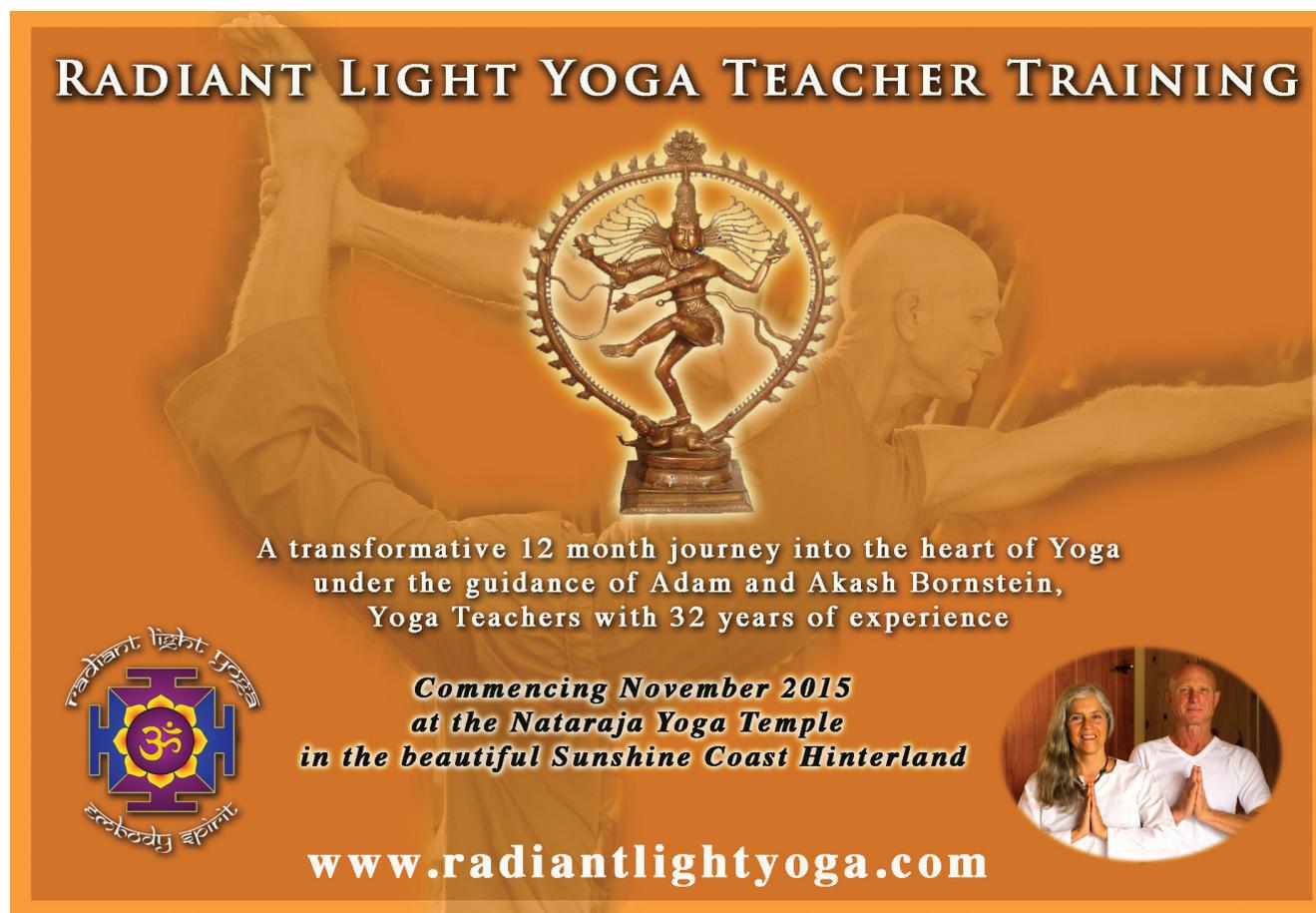
Draw together the individual parts to create a dynamic experience of wholeness. Use your smooth ujjayi breath as a magnet to link the physical, the emotional, the mental, and the energetic aspects of your being into a state of oneness.

To conclude, here is a quote from an awakened being, Anandamayi Ma:

'Through hatha yoga we access our own natural rhythm. The signs that this is happening are: a sense of play, a deep delight, and constant remembrance of the One.'

This quote is used with permission from World Wisdom Press from the book *The Essential Sri Anandamayi Ma*, by Alexander Lipski. 2007

Adam and Akash Bornstein are the founders of Radiant Light Yoga. They have both been dedicated to the path of yoga since 1980. Their teaching centre, Nataraja Yoga Temple, is located in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland. To find out about classes, workshops, kirtans, retreats, and teacher training visit www.radiantlightyoga.com.



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