

# Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana

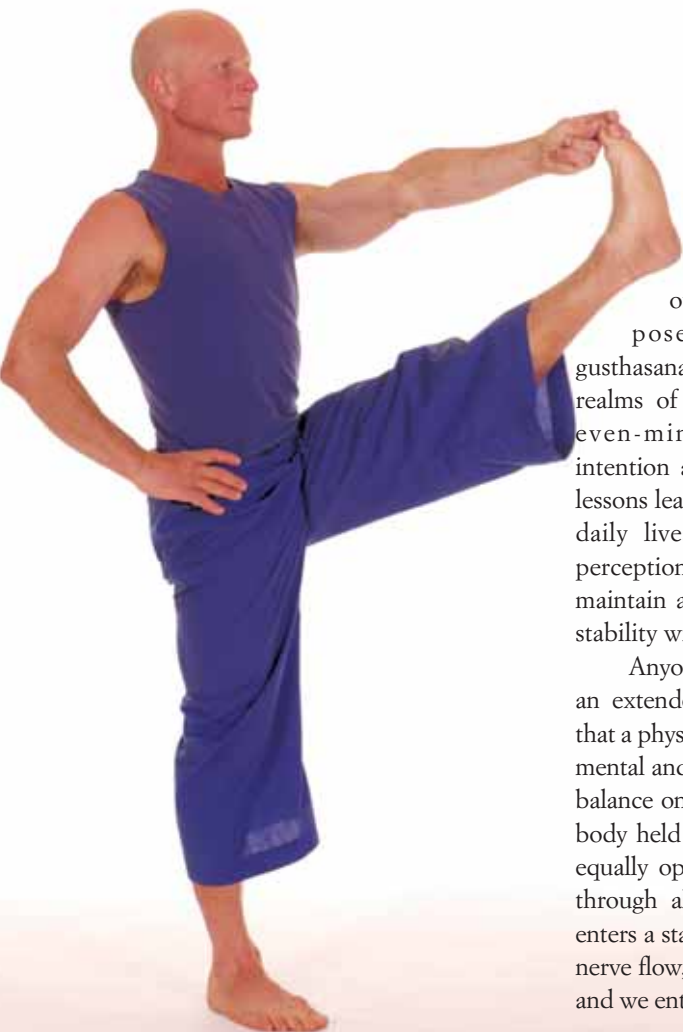
extended hand to big toe pose

By Adam Bornstein

Learn the art of balance to stand serene “amidst the crash of breaking worlds”. From the timeless teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna offers us this sublime universal message:

*“The dualities of existence, birth and death, pleasure and pain, are overcome by those who view this world with equal-mindedness.*

*Verily they are enthroned in the taintless, perfectly balanced Spirit.” – v.19*



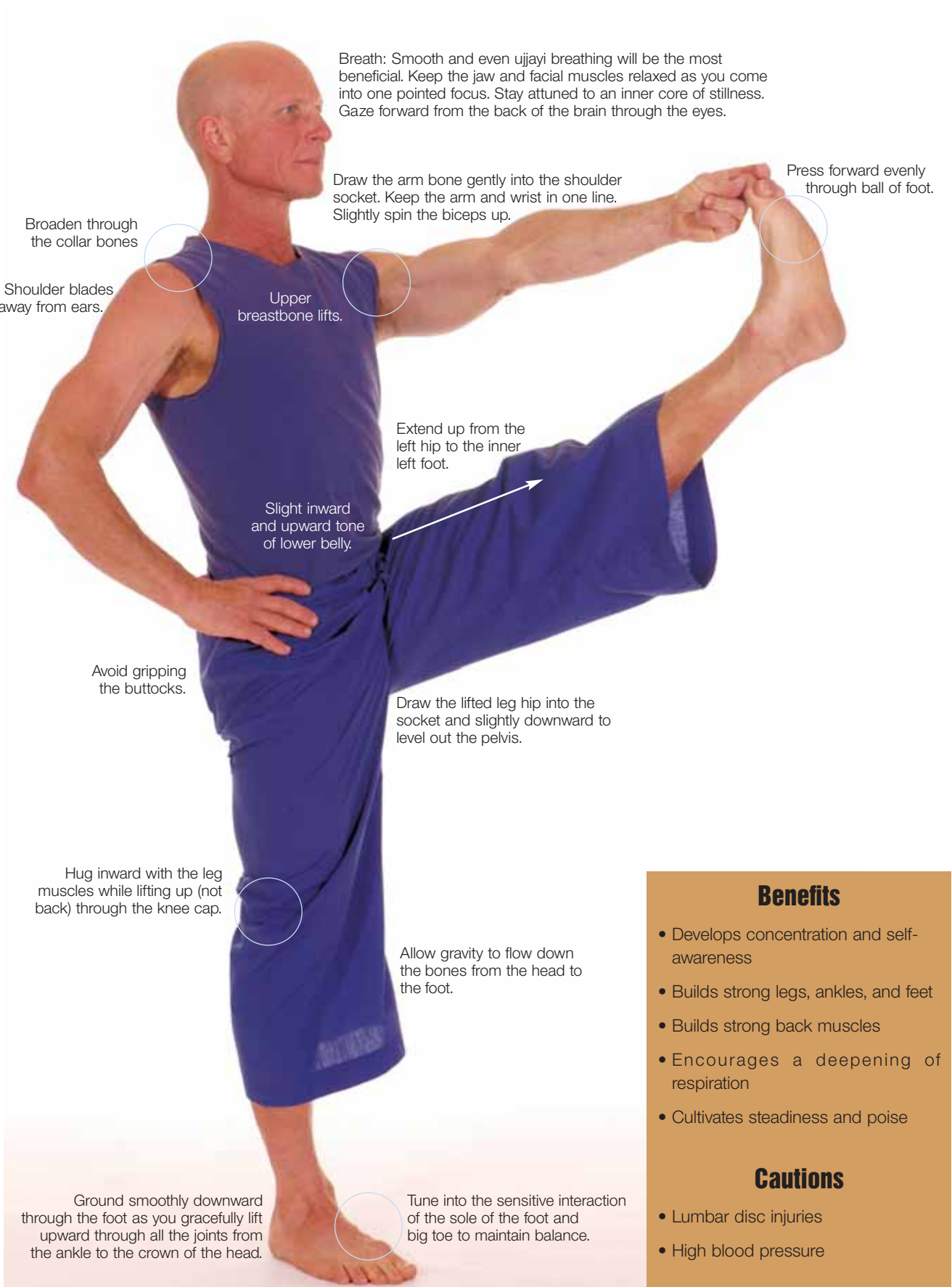
This profound instruction for living a yogic life can be initially approached through our asana practice. The chosen pose, Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana, can take us far into the realms of balance, calm strength, and even-mindedness. Through our intention and practice, we can transfer lessons learned on the yoga mat into our daily lives. This will transform our perception of life and empower us to maintain a connection with the core of stability within our Self.

Anyone who has practised yoga for an extended length of time will notice that a physical position will elicit a certain mental and energetic response. When we balance on one leg in this pose, with the body held tall, the front and back body equally open, with awareness spreading through all the cells, our entire being enters a state of equilibrium. Our energy, nerve flow, mind, body, and breath unify, and we enter into a deep state of stillness.

Two important keys for experiencing this equal-mindedness in Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana is the attention given to the breath and the use of the eyes. Regarding the use of the breath, the lower abdominal area (below the navel) will be slightly engaged to assist with the stabilisation of the pose. Because of this, the breath will naturally want to flow more through the side ribs and chest. The result is a feeling of being uplifted and invigorated.

The eyes, while open, are soft and expanded. A subtle technique is to feel that you are looking forward through the eyes from the vantage point of the back of the brain. This will naturally help you to experience a more spherical vision. At times, you may even feel that you are seeing through all the cells of the body. The net result of the breath flow and the soft eyes is balanced consciousness. Now, the asana is taking you towards that state which Krishna describes in the Bhagavad Gita.

# Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana



## Benefits

- Develops concentration and self-awareness
- Builds strong legs, ankles, and feet
- Builds strong back muscles
- Encourages a deepening of respiration
- Cultivates steadiness and poise

## Cautions

- Lumbar disc injuries
- High blood pressure

## [Steps to approach Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana]

### 1. Warming up

Practise a few poses, both flowing and static, to warm up the body and unite mind and body. Cat-Cow, Downward Facing Dog, and Sun Salutations work well, followed by a few moments of lying on the back with the legs up a wall.

### 2. Supta Padangusthasana (Supine hand to big toe pose)

This pose addresses some key alignment points. The use of a wall will help you learn how to anchor into the floor when you come to standing. A strap may be needed to enable you to reach the lifted foot. Lie on the floor with the heels and balls of the feet touching the wall. Press the right foot into the wall, and on an exhalation draw the left knee into the chest. After a few breaths here,

place the strap around the ball of the foot and begin lifting the leg up into a mild stretch. Keep the foot on the wall vertical and avoid turning the toes of the lifted foot outward. Breathe long and full, emphasising smooth exhalations and inhalations. Be sure the chin is not lifting and the collar bones are broad. Stay here for a few breaths, slowly deepening the stretch slowly. Repeat on the other side.

**Caution:** If this pose is very intense for you, it may be better to practise it over a few months before attempting the standing variation. When beginning to practise Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana, your options are to bend

the lifted leg, use a strap around the foot, or use a chair (see below). You need to be able to keep the torso directly over the pelvis with the chest broad and the lifted leg at least at a right angle to the torso as you reach for the foot.



### 3. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana at the wall

In this variation, we use the wall and a chair as aids to balancing. Place a chair approximately one leg length away from a wall. Stand with your back to the wall. You will most likely need to bring your heels a little away from the wall. Plant the right foot down into the floor. Place the left heel on the back of the chair. Place your palms to the wall. Ease the left hip towards the wall. Strengthen the standing leg by slowly hugging the muscles in towards the leg bones. On every exhalation, feel a smooth stabilising and grounding force move down the body. On every inhalation, feel that all the joints from the right ankle to the base of the skull are lifting upward. Now explore pressing the finger pads into the wall and shifting the weight forward fully onto the standing leg.

Maintain all the actions previously given. Continue to breathe. Perhaps alternate between resting back to the wall and rocking forward onto the standing leg. If you feel balanced, take your hands to the pelvic rim. Because your lower abdominal area will be slightly toned for stability, carry the breath into the side ribs and up towards the chest. This will also serve to keep you mentally alert. Come down when you are ready and repeat on the other side. An option is to place a strap around the ball of the lifted foot.

## [Variations of Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana]

### 1(a) Upavistha (open) variation

A wall can be used to assist with balance. Stand with your right side a little less than an arm's length from the wall. Place the right hand to the wall. Bring the left knee up to the chest and either place a strap around the ball of the foot, or hold the top of the big toe with the thumb, wrapping the index and middle fingers around and behind the big toe. Extend the leg forward into Utthita Hasta

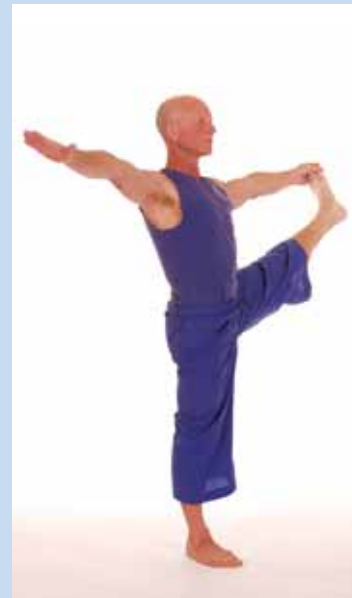
Padangusthasana. As you exhale, open the leg to the side. Make sure you are not forcing the pose. Bend the lifted leg if there is too much pull in the inner thigh or hamstrings. Take a few breaths. Repeat on the other side.



### 1(b) Upavistha variation

This free standing version is approached once the wall variation can be practised with ease. All the details are the same as above, with the added importance of accentuating both a vertical lift and a horizontal expansion. The more common variation has the yogi placing the right hand on the right hip. For a more expansive feeling, try this variation: lengthen outward from the heart area through both arms, press out with the ball of the foot (lifted leg),

while smoothly anchoring the upper arm bones into the shoulder sockets; ease the lifted leg back into the hip socket to level the pelvis. All these actions will stabilise the joints and create a sense of unity. Maintain the muscular-energetic upward lift from the floor to the head, and open outward with equal energy through the right arm, and the left arm and leg. You may find that through these combined actions balancing in the centre is both more dynamic and more supported.



### 2(a) Parvritta (revolving) variation

Face the wall and stand approximately one leg length away. Plant the right foot into the floor and lift the sole of the left foot to the wall. Inhaling, lift up through all the joints above the right foot. Exhaling, draw down through the left hip and thighbone. This will equalise the left and right sides of the spine and pelvis. Place the right hand to the outer left leg (or use a belt around the left foot). Take your left hand and place it at the back of the pelvis with the thumb and fingers on either side of the sacrum.

Inhaling, lengthen upward through the spine; exhaling, slowly and smoothly ease the ribcage into a rotation to the left. Only turn your head if your neck feels good with this. Go slowly and avoid any strain to the sacroiliac joints that lie under your left hand. Take a few breaths. Make sure the twist is lead with the rib cage and not the head. Repeat on the other side.



### 2(b) Parvritta variation

In this free standing version, the hand on the pelvis can be lifted and extended backward in line with the shoulders. Here we have the chance to really open up through the left side of the spine and pelvis. Firm up the inner right thigh. Keep the inner left foot vertical and ease the left thighbone into the hip socket and slightly towards the floor. Extend equal energy lines through the left foot and right hand. Take a few breaths here; then, come into Tadasana. Repeat on the other side.

**[Bringing all the variations together]**

Practitioners who can balance in Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana and the variations shown below, will benefit greatly from combining them all together in a unified practice: Mountain Pose, Standing Knee to Chest, Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana, Upavistha variation, Parvritta variation, Standing Knee to Chest, Mountain Pose. Start by holding each pose for five breaths. As you feel ready, slowly increase the amount of breaths per asana.



**Conclusion**

Each time we come to our mat, we are being trained to stand steady mentally, emotionally, and physically. In our standing balance poses, if we can recalibrate our internal compass to align with our centre when the weight shifts, or a distracting thought comes in, we remain balanced. Balance is a dynamic state that requires continuous fine tuning.

Stabilise your prana through your smooth breathing and keep it contained within the body. Spread your cellular intelligence to fill all the spaces from the spine to the skin. Feel the sensitivity of the sole of the foot on the floor. Your big toe has a clear connection to the brain; allow the relay of information to help you remain in your centre. Where are any slight adjustments needed? Lift up energetically from the ankle of the standing leg, opening and firming up the joints; soften with gravity to bring an inner sense of relaxation; draw the lifted leg femur into the hip socket to level the pelvis; broaden the collar bones and shoulders to access your wide, radiant heart; and allow the eyes to rest deeply like pools of liquid light.

All these details can contribute to the wholeness of the pose. It is also important to go beyond the compartmentalisation of the various parts. Open to an expanded, unified view. At times, this feels like you are seeing with a thousand eyes; at other times, it feels like you are seeing with one single eye of absolute awareness.

While holding the pose and breathing, saturate your being from the skin inwards to the core with keen attentiveness. Open to surrendering to the universal current of life-giving force present in all things. Become enthroned in the taintless, perfectly balanced Spirit within your own centre.

Adam Bornstein and his partner Akash are co-founders of Radiant Light Yoga. They have been devoted to learning, practising, and sharing yoga since 1980. They offer private tuition, classes, workshops, teacher training, and yoga therapy. Their recently completed teaching centre, Nataraja Yoga Temple welcomes all sincere students. [www.radiantlightyoga.com](http://www.radiantlightyoga.com)

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