



# Paschimottanasana

seated forward bend pose

by Adam Bornstein

Take the inner road and connect with the sacred peace within your own being.

**P**aschimottanasana (Seated forward bend) is a classic hatha yoga pose that has been extolled by the ancient rishis. This subtle, yet powerful asana has the potential to dissolve hidden tensions from the heels to the head. When physical and energetic knots are released, prana flows without impingement, and the mind loosens its grip and expands into a state of calmness. To uncover these deep benefits takes commitment and an attitude of openness.

Asana practice can train us to harness our energies and align them with the intention of yoga, i.e., to purify the body, heart, and mind; thereby clearing the way for a direct connection with our inner spiritual nature. In this state, we know, without a doubt, that we are so much more than the body or the restless mind.

To paraphrase the great sage Patanjali: Yoga is essentially about stilling the whirlpools of agitation within the mind and heart. He states that once

we quiet the waves of restlessness in our thoughts and feelings, we naturally experience our true essence.

When a full moon shines on a calm lake, its image is reflected perfectly. When there are ripples, the reflection is distorted. So it is with us. By calming thoughts and feelings, we see a clear image of our authentic Self.

In order to approach this inner reality, something important has to happen. Our prana will need to alter its flow – from moving outwardly to moving inwardly. In yogic writings, the five physical senses are likened to five wild stallions harnessed to a chariot. Without the directions of the charioteer the horses run wildly, lacking direction and purpose. The charioteer symbolises our higher awareness that is ideally and ultimately in charge of the energy of the senses.

Paschimottanasana is a powerful stimulus for reversing the outgoing energy and giving us a glimpse of our natural state of pure awareness. When we redirect our energy from the outside

to the inside, we forge a pathway into the mystery within. To make a new trail into the forest takes both clearing the way as preparation, and walking the path again and again to maintain it. So it is with Paschimottanasana.

## Beginning essentials

To practise Paschimottanasana takes awareness plus consistent application of proper technique. It is like walking the razor's edge. It can cut through knots and tensions in the body and mind and redirect our prana. If practised haphazardly, injury may result. A step-by-step progression into the pose is the most beneficial way to approach this asana.

The initial emphasis for most students will be rotating the pelvis forward at the level of the hip joints. This will tip the entire spine forward from the sacrum upwards. From this initial movement, the spine can lengthen along its entire axis all the way through to the neck.

In Sanskrit Paschima = west. This pose is often called Stretch of the West. As the yogis faced the sunrise as they practised they were stretching the west side of the body as they bent toward the sun.

The hip joints are ball and socket synovial joints. They have a variety of movement possibilities. An important joint action to encourage in forward bends is the rotation of the pelvis over the fixed heads of the thighbones. As we will explore, the use of props can greatly help with this rotation. For many students, the priority is to lengthen the hamstring muscle group at the back of the thighs. The origin of most of the hamstring muscles is the sitting bones located at the base of the pelvis.

We want to practise safely to avoid an unhealthy domino effect that can lead to injury. When we try to sit upright or bend forward, tight hamstrings will drag the pelvis under and prevent the pelvis from rotating forward at the hip joints. Since the spine interfaces with the pelvis at the sacroiliac joints, it is not only the pelvis but also the lower spine that gets pulled under. It is a dysfunctional movement to bend forward while the pelvis is tipping backward. This will

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## [Preparation for Paschimottanasana]

This preparatory sequence is designed for training the body and mind for safe practice.

If tight hamstrings and hips restrict your forward bends, your main mission will be to open up these areas, to encourage the pelvis to rotate forward at the hip joints. It will be imperative that you patiently follow the steps in the preparation sequence.



### 1. Supta Padangusthasana

This supine leg stretch is an excellent preparation for all forward bends. It is offered here with a specific orientation to access the hips and hamstrings. Begin with the knees bent and feet on the floor. Draw left knee into the chest. Place a strap around the bottom of the foot just below the ball of the foot. Lift the leg upward on an exhalation while keeping the inner line of the foot parallel with the spine. Take the strap in the right hand and place your left hand on the left thigh. The idea here is to maintain a gentle lumbar curve while lengthening the hamstring muscles at the back of the thigh. The hand on the thigh helps to direct the left hip back down to the floor. This will aim the stretch into the hamstrings, and away from the lower back.



### 2b.

Maintaining the strong lift of the sitting bones, engage the quadriceps muscles on the front of the thighs. This will fully straighten the knees. Feel as if the knees are being pulled up into the hip creases at the front of the pelvis. Fold deeply here, aiming this deep crease towards the diagonal, up and away from the wrists. Stay here for three breaths.



### 2a. Adho Mukha Svanasana

Approaching Downward Facing Dog Pose in three distinct stages will teach the body and mind the essential lesson of pelvic rotation at the hip joints.

On an exhalation, lift up into Downward Facing Dog Pose by pressing the hands down and forward into the floor. Keeping the knees bent and the heels vertically up gives full emphasis to tilting the sitting bones up and away from the hands. Feel this clear turning of the pelvis over the heads of the femur bones. Take three breaths here.



### 2c.

Continue to lift upwards through the sitting bones, and on your next exhalation, begin to descend the heels towards the floor. Avoid collapsing the heels in or out; feel the centre of the heels moving in the direction of the earth. Take three breaths here. Exhale and release down onto all fours, then press back into the Pose of the Child to integrate. Be here for a few breaths.

## [The Pose]



### Gentle variation

In this variation, place a rolled towel or blanket under the back of the knees. Use your hands to first slide the back of the thighs out to the sides and then to draw each buttock back one at a time. This will assist the rolling up onto the sitting bones and the rotation of the pelvis. On an exhalation, anchor down through the legs and hips. On an inhalation, lengthen the spine up and out of the pelvis. Press forward through the balls of the feet, while pulling back on the strap. This will help to stabilise the spine in the pose. Draw the chin slightly down and lengthen through the crown of the head. After a few breaths, come out of the pose on an inhalation. Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position and feel the after-effects.



### Phase II

For those with enough hamstring flexibility, the next step is to tilt the pelvis and spine further forward to take hold of the feet. Maintain the anchoring downward with the legs and sitting bones, while you reach forward with the arms. Press forward through the balls of the feet, while pulling back with the hands to stabilise. Draw the upper arm bones smoothly back home into the shoulder sockets. This will broaden the upper chest and encourage full breathing. Continue to feel that each exhalation is earthing the legs downward, while each inhalation lifts the spine up, out, and forward. Be sure to align the neck and head with the rest of the spine. After a few breaths, rise up on an inhalation, sliding the hands up the legs. Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position and feel the after-effects.



### Phase III

If the prior stage can be practised with ease, and the back of the legs and hips are sufficiently stretched, you may be able to practise with straight legs. Actively press the inner legs down into the floor. This will both anchor the pose and aid in internally rotating the hip joints and thighs, which will assist the lengthening of the spine. Firming the quadriceps muscles on the front thighs will help to release the hamstrings. Support the spine by simultaneously pressing the balls of the feet forward and drawing back with the hands and arms into the shoulder sockets. Begin to explore tilting the spine forward with each exhalation. After a few breaths, engage the muscles around the lower belly and rise out of the pose by either sliding the hands up the legs or dynamically reaching forward and up lifting the arms by the ears. Exhale the arms down and sit in a comfortable cross-legged position to feel the after-effects.

## For the very flexible students

If you are very flexible in the hamstrings, you will need to adapt the pose so you do not overstretch and destabilise the lower spine and hips. Forward bends practised with excessive pelvic rotation may also lead to chronically contracted lower back muscles.

To counteract excess pelvic rotation, contract the lower belly muscles as you move into the pose. These muscles attach to the anterior pelvis and will inhibit excess rotation by exerting a lifting of the pubic bone.

Also remember that in order to lengthen and smoothly traction the spine safely, a

strong base of support is necessary. In Paschimottanasana, anchor your inner legs downward into the earth. This will give you a protective base from which to reach up and out with the spine.

## [The Pose continued]



### Phase IV

As you continue to lengthen and fold forward, the belly will come down towards the thighs, the chest towards the knees, and the head towards the shins. Take hold of the big toes and open the elbows out to the sides and then to the floor. Be sure to continue pressing forward through the balls of the feet, while pulling back with the hands. As you draw the arms into the shoulder sockets, lengthen forward through the neck and head. After a few breaths, rise out of the pose as in phase III. Sit and feel the after-effects.

### Phase V

As you continue to progress into the pose, you may feel that the hands can reach past the sides of the feet. If so, then take hold of one wrist beyond the feet. Follow all the instructions for the last variation. Keep the feet, inner legs, and top of thighs active throughout the first few breaths. Be sure to press evenly through the balls of the feet so the little toe side of the feet doesn't collapse in. For this deeper variation, initially focus on the front body: Actively draw energy up the front of the legs, from the shins to the hip creases. Then, move energy forward from the lower belly through the upper abdomen, into the chest and head. Feel these two distinct energy lines – up the legs to the groins, and forward through the front torso. Now bring awareness to the back body. Inwardly explore the lengthening through the backs of the legs, buttocks, spine, and out through the crown of the head. Become poised in the centre, breathing quietly. Reclaim your prana and draw it within from the skin to the spine. Slowly increase the time spent in the pose. Rise up out of the pose as in the previous variations. Sit quietly for a few moments, focusing your inner gaze at the point between the eyebrows. Experience the funnelling of the prana that you have liberated into the main central energy channel, sushumna, and upwards towards the brain.



## [Counter Pose]



### Counter pose

Reverse Table Pose will help to stabilise the areas that were lengthened in Paschimottasana. You have an option to keep the chin tucked into the chest if you have a sensitive neck. To increase the stabilisation, squeeze a yoga block between the thighs as you hold this pose for a few breaths.

# Benefits

- Releases tension along the entire posterior body from heels to head.
- Liberates blocked energy and directs it into sushumna, the pranic spine.
- Internalises consciousness to experience an inner union.
- Massages and tones abdominal and pelvic organs.
- Eases menstrual cramping.

### Contraindications

- Disc and spinal injuries

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reverse the natural forward curve of the lumbar spine, putting extreme pressure on the discs and tissues of this potentially sensitive area. This may set the stage for backaches and eventual disc injuries.

In addition, with the lumbar excessively rounding, the chest will most likely collapse towards the belly. This will block the breathing process, compress the abdominal organs, and can even detrimentally affect our moods.

**An experiment**

Good reference points for mastering the pelvic rotation are the sitting bones located at the bottom of the pelvis. You can feel these bones while sitting on a hard surface and rolling forward and back across the pelvic floor. Try this experiment to feel how tight hamstrings affect the pelvis and spine. Sit cross-legged on the floor and place one hand on the lower back and upper pelvis, with the other hand on the belly. As you rock backward towards the buttocks, notice how the lower back rounds and the chest collapses downward. Now rock forward and observe how the

lumbar moves forward into a concave curve. You will feel the frontal edge of the sitting bones make contact with the floor.

In Paschimottanasana, we are looking for a balance between extremes. We want to move the pelvic rim forward without compressing the lumbar area. Ideally in this asana, we are lengthening the lumbar.

Phase one of Paschimottanasana is turning the pelvis at the hip joints, rolling forward on the sitting bones and stretching the whole spine forward. Phase two is releasing the torso towards the legs. The first area to touch will be the belly onto the thighs, then the chest, and finally the head.

**Conclusion**

Paschimottanasana is a hidden treasure that can bring us ever-deepening realisations of the inner life. These, however, can be overlooked if our practice remains superficial. The subtle essence of the pose requires consistent practise to unlock its mysteries. The development of concentration (dharana) is a primary benefit of this asana. This is

a key to progression into the deeper dimensions of yoga practice. Concentration leads to meditation (dhyana) where the body, mind, heart, and soul are unified.

In today's fast-paced life, we are blessed to have these practices which turn us within and take us from movement into stillness. Practising Paschimottanasana is akin to going on a silent retreat every day. The depth of inner peace the pose bestows on us becomes the backdrop of our daily activities. Then, we can say that we are truly living yoga. In the words of Paramahansa Yogananda, "Where motion ceases, God begins."

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. Adam and Akash welcome all sincere students to their teaching centre, Nataraja Yoga Temple. [www.radiantlightyoga.com](http://www.radiantlightyoga.com)

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