

Crane pose  
**Bakasana**

by Peter Thomson



Bakasana (Crane pose) is the foundation or hub for all the 'bird' asanas: (Kukkutasana (Rooster pose), Garudasana (Eagle pose), Chakorasana (Moon bird pose), Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (Pigeon pose), Parsva Bakasana (Side crane pose), Pincha Mayurasana (Peacock Pose), Tittibhasana (Firefly Pose), and many of these asanas are accessed through Bakasana itself. The 'birds', as a whole, are thrilling to perform. They give a feeling of strength and capability; as well as developing strength and stability in the spine and upper body. This then provides a platform for other asanas, particularly back bending asanas.

Bakasana is the key asana in the 'birds', and is the one which particularly warrants a high priority in our practice. In a sense, in practising Bakasana, we are also practising the other bird poses, and it can certainly be our access to them. I know for me, after an accident resulting in shoulder surgery to both shoulders, a key focus in my practice has been on rebuilding Bakasana as my re-entry back into the world of the 'birds'.

Bakasana, in yoga asana hierarchy, is advanced, and demands much in terms of understanding and strength, particularly though the wrists, arms, and upper body. It also demands lightness, speed, and facility in action. In these terms, it is not an introductory asana, nor is it an asana to be approached casually or disrespectfully. Rather, it deserves careful preparation, a consistent and intelligent practice, and the guidance of a skilled teacher. I would say that consistent, long term practice of Sirsasana I and II (Headstand) are prerequisites. These, in turn, demand stability and good timing in Ardha Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand). Obviously, Bakasana is not appropriate during menstruation or pregnancy, or to beginning students when the above conditions have not been met.

As ever, in the context of yoga, what the practice demands of us, is also the fruit that our practice yields. The practice of Bakasana develops the very qualities that, at first, we struggle with as shortcomings. The practice becomes our way of overcoming them.

### The Bakasana trick

Technically, Bakasana is something of a trick. The asana tempts us to focus on our arms and their strength or lack thereof. But the real secret to getting up

in Bakasana lies in the suppleness of our groins, and with that suppleness, our ability to make of our body, particularly our legs and hips, a weight which is as compact and condensed as possible. In effect, this means that our weight should be gathered and not dispersed.

This gathering or consolidating of our physical body is also the energetic, emotional, and mental effect of Bakasana practice. It converts us into something very contained, very stabilised, very focused, and from there, more directed.

One morning, back in January 1998, I was practising Bakasana in the Institute in Pune (RIMYI) and Mr Iyengar interceded and gave me a series of points on bakasana which utterly transformed my performance. Something similar happened again in June this year. I will be working with these points throughout this article. Their main thrust, however, in terms of understanding, is to consistently make the asana more compact, so the weight being lifted is brought more fully and directly over the points of active support in the hand contact with the floor. The effect of this creates a feeling of enhanced lightness, dynamism, and power. The practitioner *balances* the trunk and legs on *dynamic* arms rather than holding the asana statically. The 'balances' teach us to meet life with dynamic hands, to create rather than wait! What is heavy is transformed towards lightness. What tends to slump and withdraw from participation becomes included and contributes actively and willingly. The psychological effect is profound. One cannot but be filled with wonder and gratitude!

The process of consolidating and containing our weight distribution is much helped by freedom of movement,

particularly in the groins, thighs, and lower legs. In this sense, Bakasana asks of us and implies that we have done the work that goes beforehand. Put another way, in seeking to work with Bakasana and the other balances or 'birds', we need to ensure that we have worked well with the preparatory asanas and that our preparation is up to speed.

Some of this preparation, particularly in the legs and hips, is built into our work with the standing asanas such as Trikonasana (Triangle pose), Parsvakonasana (Intense side stretch pose), and Vrksasana (Tree pose). Forward bending asanas as a whole will also be helpful. For the arms (including wrists and hands), Ardha Mukha Svanasana (Downward facing dog pose), Ardha Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand) are helpful, as are 'the baby balances', notably Vasisthasana (Side plank pose), which was the subject of a previous article (issue 19).

### Repetition

The importance of practice and particularly that sense of practice as repetition, cannot be over-stated I feel in relation to bakasana (and associated asanas). It is not simply a matter of performing one or two and moving onto something else. We need to get the numbers up ... and this process develops particular qualities and characteristics of mind necessary to our practice. I well remember Mr Iyengar practising bakasana in sets of 10 or 20 well into his 70s, perhaps with aggregate numbers in the 50-100 range.

Repetitions of this order magnify the effects of bakasana especially on psychological levels. We need to practice responsibly in relation to this and to soften and smooth out the containment

## [Preparation]

They say the secret to good house painting is preparation, preparation, preparation! So also with yoga.

As an immediate preparation for Bakasana, I would typically do Ardha Mukhva Svanasana, Ardha Mukhva Vrksasana, Uttanasana (Standing forward bend), (perhaps all three in cycle several times), and sometimes Prasarita Padottanasana (Intense wide leg stretch), a simple squat (with support under the heels if balance cannot be readily maintained), Malasana (Garland pose), again with heel support and perhaps a belt to assist joining of hands behind the back. (Photo A)

Bakasana may be accessed directly from the floor, or more easily perhaps, from a bolster or block under the feet. (photos B and C). In practising the 'birds', Bakasana is normally accessed from Sirsasana II (Three point headstand) photos D and E. The idea is to get the shin bones as high up the upper arms as possible and the upper arms as low down the shins as possible in their contact with each other. This access is made easier from Sirsasana II, which provides the most compact securing of the shins onto the back of the upper arms, and the deepest and most intense gathering or consolidating of the asana. It also provides a more direct, no fuss access which keeps our minds engaged in the asana, so that we can experience more of the mental effect. This leads to a more satisfying, perhaps thrilling experience, particularly on an energetic level. This experience, this feel for the asana, becomes our inspiration, our motivation for further practice.

This question of accessing Bakasana from Sirsasana II leads me back again to the importance of practice as our fundamental methodology, and from that practice the central importance of adequate preparation. Ethically, the practitioner has to ask themselves continually why they pursue the attainment of asanas that have not had the support of the necessary preparatory work in their practice. When this preparatory work has been done,

The asana tempts us to focus on our arms and their strength or lack thereof.

**Photo A.**



**Photo B.**



**Photo C.**



**[The Method]**

This brings us to Guruji's points, delivered almost like sutras, and demanding perhaps some commentary for general circulation. I will group them into two parts – first, the feet and legs, and second, the arms, upper body, and trunk. These points are given in a practice situation and not in class, and in this sense they are not 'teaching' in the conventional sense.

**Feet/legs**

1. Broaden the balls of the feet – which means widening from the inner ball of foot to the outer.
2. Point the balls of the feet at the floor.
3. Lengthen the inner and outer arches of the feet.
4. Extend into each heel.
5. Suck the calf muscles up towards the back knee.
6. Don't let the heel level drop.

The effect of these points is to make the Bakasana more compact and contained. Try it! The action in the feet draws them back into contact with the lower legs and the thighs. This allows us to get the knees further forward over the hands.

**From that place:**

7. Draw the arch of the foot towards the back of the knee.
  8. Draw the bottom of the patella (knee cap) up into the centre quadriceps (front thigh muscles).
  9. Sharpen the point of the knee – fast!
- By now we are starting to fly.

**Hands/arms/upper body/trunk**

1. In coming up, draw the inner forearm up. Suck it into the bone.
2. Lift the inner bicep (in effect the inner armpit) up.
3. Body weight must stay forward over the hands! Don't fall back! Come up from the middle to the upper thoracic spine (i.e. the spine in the upper back).
4. In coming up, lift from lower lateral (side) back ribs.
5. Suck the breastbone in towards the spine, and broaden the shoulder blades.
6. Maintain the width of both collarbones.

Photo D.



Photo E.



## But the real secret lies in the suppleness of our groins.

when the practice is engaged in for its own sake, for the love of it, attainments such as Bakasana come fluidly and effortlessly as a natural extension of the work already done.

I have outlined above some of the preparatory asana for Bakasana. It is important to appreciate, however, that this preparation is both mental and physical, with perhaps the former being more important. Students may come to Bakasana and feel that it is too difficult, or they don't have the strength, or perhaps even fear may arise strongly in the mind. In the context of a practice, this is simply not a problem. All it signifies is that the practice to support the asana has not yet been done and we can work our way back into a better placed approach to the asana simply by working in our practice with its antecedents – those asanas in the hierarchy of practice that precede it. In this sense, there is always a pathway that we can engage in, and have effective means for further development at our disposal. When we have gained some access to the asana, and fear for example no longer

arises, we are presented with the possibilities of endless refinement and the excitement of personal discovery. Our practice then feeds off itself with our motivation for more practice being inspired by the practice we have already done.

Without that practice relationship however, asanas such as Bakasana can become tests; tests which we may pass or we may fail, but which thereafter leave us with nowhere to go. If we fail, we are frustrated perhaps, and disappointed. If we succeed, we are perhaps vindicated. We have asserted our strength, but our relationship with the asana is exploitive and without affection. We then move onto something else where the same pattern can be repeated again and again. We are not growing.

So with Bakasana, on both a physical and emotional level, the work with Sirsasana (and its antecedents) is also important. It leads us naturally into Sirsasana II, and Sirsasana II leads us naturally into accessing Bakasana with respect and affection, without fear, and safely.

The overall effect of these points is to sharpen the inner arms and to bring the arms towards straight. The weight stays forward over the hands, so that we lift straight up and not back and up. The vitality of the extended arms creates drive and lift into the upper spine, which arches in the total antithesis to a backbend. The part of the trunk is as high as we can get it with the hips down and not up. We are in effect a flying ball, balanced on and over the hands; most particularly where the base of the fingers meet the palms. We are more towards the inside hands and less towards the outside hands, so that the inner arms are incredibly sharp. Our hands are active in their contact with

the floor so that we drive through the arms. The top shoulders need to be kept broad so that they don't crowd the neck. The neck and throat need to be kept soft so that we use our arms rather than our throat for support! In the early stages of practice, the head can be left in line with the spine and not raised. Common mistakes are to sit back on the back on the heels of the hands, resting on our outer arms, with the spine slumped, flat, and dull. The hips will be raised in compensation, and the toes will be pointed with the feet and legs not integrated into the hands. Our energy will be dispersed and dissipated. We will not fly, and we will not be inspired!

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and sharpness that bakasana brings to our systems on all levels.

I would suggest long (3-5 mins) timings and repetitions of *supta padangustasana* and its variations (especially *supta padangustasana 2*) perhaps followed by some supported forward bending, particularly *janu*

*sirsasana* several times each side, and long timings in *paschimottanasana*. *Supta virasana*, especially with support and weights can then be very helpful to ease tightness and hardness in the front and inner groins. A long held supported (*nirlamba*) *sarvangasana* off a chair or trestle can often then be totally exquisite.

*I am indebted in this article to my teacher Sri BKS Iyengar who, as I write this, has just entered his 91st year. An asana expresses a thousand words!*