

PRONE POSTURES AND THE SPINE

By S. Ramaswami

Postures starting with lying face down (prone position) form another important group of asanas useful especially for the spine and low back. When done with vinyasas, they are simple to progress and have very important benefits. The three main asanas taken up are, Bhujangaasanam (Serpent), Salabhasanam (locust) and Dhanuraasanam (bow posture).

BHJANGAASANAM

STEP 1. Start with Samasthithi. Inhale raise arms overhead, interlock fingers turned outward.

STEP 2. Exhale proceed to do Utkataasanam and place the palms by the side of the feet.

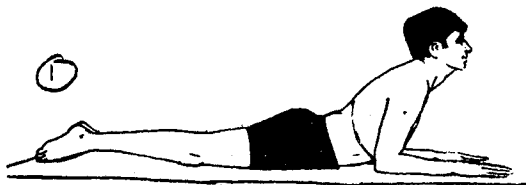
STEP 3. Take a few breaths: then holding the breath after exhalation, pressing the palms jump back to chaturangadandasanam. Then lie down on the floor, face down. This procedure may be adopted before starting any prone postures.

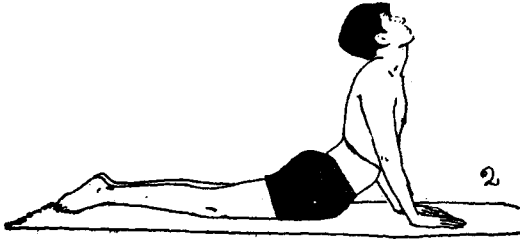
STEP 4. Keeping the palms by the side of the body, in line with the diaphragm, exhale and raise the upper body by pressing the palms, the pelvis and the legs. Arch the back, upto naval position,

keeping the eyes open. —This is Bhujangaasanam or Serpent posture.

STEP 5. Stay for a few seconds and return to starting position.

One may merely keep the forearm on the ground and raise the upper body as shown in Sketch (1). This is a very simple and effective posture to relieve strain in the neck. Some authors call it Makaraasanam or Crocodile posture.





STEP 6. The next step will be to raise the upper body and arching the spine, raising the trunk upto pubis, on exhalation (Refer sketch 2). Press the pubis, contract the anal and gluteal muscles. This is one more variation of Bhujangasana. Inhale, return. Repeat a few times.

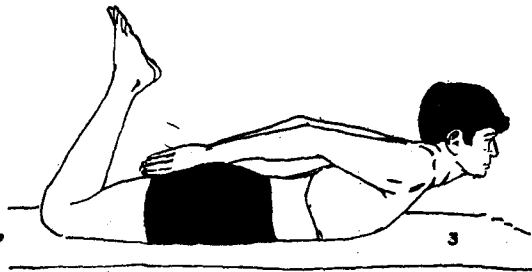
Bhujangasana is especially useful for relieving low back pain and if done carefully under proper supervision could be very beneficial for those suffering from slight displacement of the disc. It strengthens the ligamentary and muscular supports of the spinal column.

STEP 7. Bhujangasana, as the name indicates, should be done purely on the strength of spine and the aid of the palms should be dispensed with, so that the posture looks like a limbless reptile, the snake. Hence the palms are kept along the body by the side of the thighs, or on the back, or with back salute. A further variation will require, bending the knees, so that the legs are parallel

to the ground, and the chest above the ground, slightly arched (Refer sketch 3). There is a tremendous contraction of the lower back and it helps to relieve low back pain. Some authors refer to this variation as Makarasana or also as a variation of Salabhasana.

SALABAASANAM

Salabhasana is an improvement on Bhujangasana, in that not only the chest is raised and spine arched but the legs are also raised so that the body is balanced on the stomach. A number of variations and a step by step approach will be very beneficial.



STEP 1. Start from samasthi. Inhale, raise arms overhead, interlocking fingers and turned outward.

STEP 2. Exhale proceed to do Utkatasana, then keep the palms by the side of the legs.

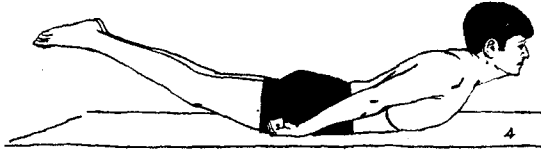
STEP 3. Pressing the palms, exhale and jump back to Chaturangadandasana.

STEP 4. Stay for a few breaths. Exhale, lie down on the ground, face downwards; keep the arms stretched along the body, facing upward.

STEP 5. Close the fists. Inhale, raise the right arm overhead, sweeping it along the ground. Exhale raise right arm, head, chest, shoulders, and the right leg from the pelvis, so that the right thigh is clearly above the ground.

STEP 6. Inhale. Return to lying position.

STEP 7. Exhale raise right arm, head, chest, shoulders, and the left leg, from the pelvis, stretching all the way from the finger tips to the toes along the spine and across to the left leg.



STEP 8. Return to starting position. Exhale, lower the right arm, and the left leg.

STEP 9 to 12. Repeat with left arm raised overhead.

STEP 13. Raise both arms overhead, inhaling, and keep both palms together as if doing pranam. Exhale raise both arms and both legs, so that the balancing is on the naval region. The stretching is felt all over the body from finger tips to the stretched ankles, feet and toes. The shoulders are thrown slightly backward forming a canal along the spine. The gluteal muscles are contracted to enhance stretching the spine and the legs.

STEP 14. Return to starting position. Keep the arms by the side of the body and repeat. This is Salabaasanam. (Refer sketch 4).

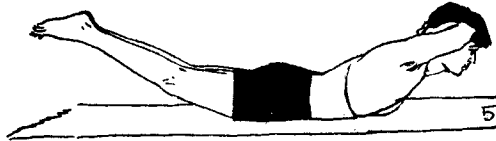
Further variations

1) Keep the palms interlocked and on the back of the neck. Exhale, raise head, chest, arms and also the legs, keep the knees together, and straight. Some authors call it Makarasanam, but

basically it is a variation of Salabhasanam. Inhale, return to lying down position (Refer to sketch 5)

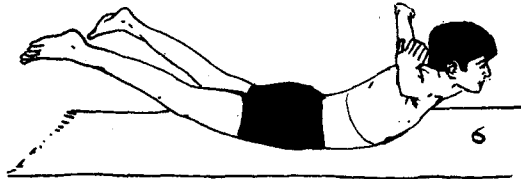
DHANURAASANAM

Having made the shoulders, low back and the spine supple, one may attempt Dhanu-



2) Inhale spread arms, keep them at shoulder level, palms on the ground. Exhale, raise head, shoulders and the stretched hands. Raise also the legs and spread them as much as possible, balancing

raasanam to enhance the effects of these easier aasanas and also impart strength to shoulders and also the back. Dhanuraasanam can be done with various preparations and vinyasas.



on the naval region. Inhale return to starting position. It is known as Vimeanaasanam. (Refer sketch 6.)

3) Keep the palms on the back in a 'Pranam' position. Exhale raise head, shoulders, arch the spine and raise the legs, again balancing on the lower abdomen.

STEPS 1 to 3. As in Bhujangasanam.

STEP 4. Inhale, raise right arm overhead, making a sweeping movement along the floor.

Step 5. Exhale, bend the left knee and hold the left hand, behind the back. Initi-

ally it may not be possible to do so for many, but the preparatory asanas, especially Salabhasanam will be beneficial.

Step 6. After one or two breaths, exhale, raise the head, right hand and arch the spine simultaneously pulling the left leg with the thigh up, as high as possible, keeping the right leg on the ground.

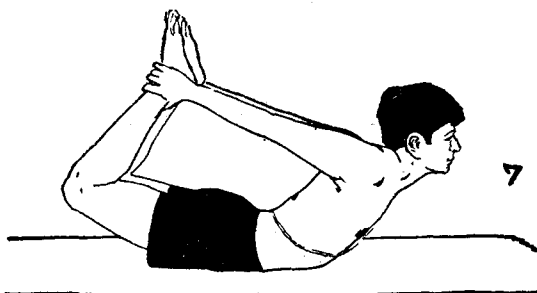
Step 7. Inhale. Return to position.

Step 8. Exhale, lower the right arm and hold the left ankle with both hands. On next exhalation, raise the head, chest and shoulders and pull the left leg upward as high as possible, arching the spine. Inhale, return.

Step 9. Inhale, holding the left ankle with the right hand, raise the left arm overhead. Exhale, raise the head, chest and shoulders, left arm and also pull the left leg up keeping the right leg on the ground. Inhale, return.

Step 10 to 15. Repeat for the other side.

Step 16. Exhale bend both knees and hold both ankles by the respective hands. Inhale and on exhaling, raise the head, chest, shoulders and pull the legs up as high as possible arching the back and pulling the



thighs as a bow (Refer sketch 7). Stay for a few seconds and return to position. Repeat a few times. The knees and ankles should be kept close.

Step 17. After some practice, after raising for Dhanurasanam exhale and roll over to one side, keeping the body arched. On inhalation return to Dhanurasanam position. Repeat on other side.

Step 18. Now hold the right ankle by the left hand, of the left ankle by the right hand. On exhalation arch the trunk. This is one variation of Dhanurasanam, working more on shoulders, forearms and wrists. The shoulder blades touch each other forming a canal along the spinal column.

BENEFITS: With age the low back becomes rigid and Dhanurasanam helps to keep the low back supple and hence one is supposed to be kept young by the regular

practice of Dhanurasanam. Apart from strengthening the spine, it works on the abdominal organs and improves their function. Along with practice of Salabhasanam, persons who suffer from slight slipped discs, could benefit considerably.

Human beings with their unnatural upright position aggravated by sedentary habits and other activities requiring crouching most of the time as office workers, sportsmen, etc., feel the tonic effects of this robust back bending exercise.

Salabhasanam is also very useful counterpose for many forward bending exercises and also those requiring the curving of the spine forward as Sarvangasana and Halasana.

Gherunda refers to these postures in his Samhita and the following are the benefits, according to him. Makarasana and Salabhasana

are supposed to increase the body heat or specifically it improves circulation, digestion and metabolism.

Regarding Bhujangasanam:

Angushta Naabhi Paryantam
Adho Bhoomau Vininyaseth.
Karatalaabhyaam Dharaam Dhru-
twa
Urdhwasirshaha Phaneeva Hi
Dehaagnihni Vardhate nityam
Sarvaroga vinaasanam.
Jaagarthi Bhujangi Devi
Bhujangaasana saadhanam.

The portion from the naval to the toes, is kept on the ground. Place the pelvis on

the ground, raise the head (and upper portion of the body) like a serpent. It is called serpent posture. This always increases bodily heat, eradicates all ailments, and by practice of Bhujangaasana, Goddess Bhujangi (serpant goddess or Kumudatini) becomes alive or is awakened.

And Dhanuraasanam is simply explained as follows:

Prasaarya Paadau Bhuvi Danda-
roopau
Karan-cha Prishte Dhritapaa-
dayugmam.

Kriwa Dhanustulya parivarhita-
ngam
Nigadya yogi Dhanuraasanam
Tat

Stretching the legs on the ground, straight like a stick and catching hold of the feet with the hands, and making the body bent or arched like or bow, is known by Yogis as Dhanuraasanam.

Many practitioners of this group of asanaas feel smooth and better respiration, improved digestion and better peristaltic action. The pro- state also is activated, it is believed.



