

The Practice of Surya Namaskara

By Paul Fox

A traditional Ashtanga Yoga class begins with the opening mantra and then students are expected to launch straight into sun salutes (Surya = Sun; Namaskara = Salutations).

In the West many teachers adjust the system slightly to incorporate a period for preparing the body, for safety reasons and because we live in a cooler climate. In the practice proper, the process of warming up the body continues through the sun salutes A & B. A full practice means five sun salute As and five sun salute Bs, taking around twenty minutes to practice. At the end of the Surya Namaskara sequences, students are thoroughly warmed up, and may be sweating profusely and struggling to maintain an even and steady breath.

Indeed, the practice of sun salutes at the start of the Ashtanga Yoga Primary Series is the most physically demanding part of the whole practice in terms of strength, stamina and aerobic demands on the body. For this reason it may be necessary for you to build up your strength and stamina gradually by not forcing yourself to do the full 5 and 5 right from the start. Surya Namaskara A should be mastered first before moving on to Surya Namaskara B. A short practice might include three As and two Bs.

So why are sun salutes so important? Surya Namaskara A & B contain all the elements of the Ashtanga Yoga practice. You learn to synchronise breath and movement, to incorporate bandha (core strength) into your practice and experience the essence of Ashtanga Yoga, which is Vinyasa (coordinate breath-movement system). In the sun salutes, all the theory of Ashtanga Yoga comes together into a beautiful flowing practice. You are called to stand at the front of your mat in the neutral standing position, Samasthitih, with feet together, shoulders and arms relaxed, bandha on and ujjayi breath providing a steady and even rhythm of breath. From there you are working towards flowing through the 9 or 17 positions of Surya Namaskara, and then returning to Samasthitih.

Uniquely in yoga, your teacher may count you through each Vinyasa of the Primary Series. This is a traditional teaching technique which “drills” the students so that they breathe and move in the correct manner. Counting is possible because each and every vinyasa in the Primary Series has its own number and this number always equals the number of moves necessary to get from Samasthitih to the posture being taught and then back to Samasthitih. As the neutral, starting position, Samasthitih does not have a number assigned to it and can be considered to have a value of zero for the purposes of counting.

Counting provides a framework and discipline for the practice and encourages a strong group energy which can help to carry people along in their own practice.

If you are being counted through the Sun Salutes, you will hear the following numbers being called – usually in Sanskrit and English.

Sanskrit Counting

1. Ekam (Ay-kam)
2. Dve (Dway)
3. Trini (Treeny)
4. Chatvari (Cha-twary)
5. Panca (Pan-cha)
6. Shat (Shat)
7. Sapta (Sup-ta)
8. Ashtau (Ash-toe)
9. Nava (Nava)
10. Dasa (Desha)
11. Ekadasa (Eka-deshar)
12. Dvadasa (Dwar-deshar)
13. Trayodasa (Trayo-deshar)
14. Chaturdasa (Chatur-deshar)
15. Pancadasa (Pan-cha-deshar)
16. Sodasa (Show-deshar)
17. Saptadasa (Sup-ta-deshar)

Counting should follow the pattern of: number, breath (in or out), movement, drishti (looking place) and any further instruction that may be necessary. For example, sun salute A begins as follows: “Ekam One, inhale, reach up and look thumbs”.

Of course, in both Surya Namaskara A & B there is one breath in each position apart from the downward dog in position 6 of A and the downward dog in position 14 of B. These two postures are held for five breaths

Modifying Sun Salutes

If you have tight hamstrings you will be unable to have your hands flat on the floor with legs straight in positions 2 and 8 of Surya Namaskara A and positions 2 and 16 of Surya Namaskara B. In that case it is better to bend the knees and maintain contact with the floor through the hands. This earth connection provides the correct and stable connection for the jump or step back – the next move in the vinyasa. (If you have wrist or ankle/toe problems you will not be able to jump the legs back, and should step back instead.) If you are jumping back you should feel some weight being transferred from the feet to their hands in position 3, so that the hands are the foundation for the jump back. In advanced practitioners this jump back becomes like a mini handstand, with the body “floating” to the next position on the out breath. The same advice applies to the jump forward towards the end of both sun salute vinyasas.

Chaturangadandasana is performed in position 4 of Surya Namaskara A and positions 4, 8 and 12 of Surya Namaskara B. The correct practice of chaturangadandasana requires you to hold the whole of the body off the floor with the hand supporting the weight of the front half of the body (elbows bent and tucked into the side) and the toes (with toes tucked under) supporting the weight of the back half of the body. At first this may be beyond you if you lack the necessary strength in the arms. In that case, lower the knees to the floor and then the chest floor until you have developed enough arm strength.

In the backbend position, or upward dog, (position 5 in sun salute A; positions 5, 9, and 13 in sun salute B) ensure that you do not lock the arms straight and lift the hips off the floor (which puts too much strain on the lower back). Elbows should be slightly bent and upper arms rolling outwards to enable the shoulders to relax and stay open, creating space for the back bend.