

Chataranga Dandasana 'Four Limbed Staff Pose'



Good preparation over the long term is necessary

To practice this exacting asana safely we need to prepare over the long term and **should not simply practice this pose as part of a sequence without first learning how it should be performed in isolation**. This is because if students simply work dynamically moving through this pose they are very likely to work without awareness, potentially damaging connective tissues and muscles around the shoulder joint and may use inappropriate muscles to compensate for weak or shortened muscles further compounding structural imbalances. But what needs to be strengthened and mobilised?

There are many muscle groups involved in this asana because many muscles are working **isometrically**, i.e. we are contracting stretched muscles against some force of immovable resistance. Most muscles are concentrically contracting to hold a stable position but the arm muscles are **eccentrically contracting** i.e. gradually lengthening against the force of gravity.

So many muscles require long term strengthening to include those of the anterior and posterior torso, anterior and posterior upper legs & lower legs, shoulder girdle stabilisers, upper arm extensors, pronators and wrist extensors. Meaning key muscles in which to build strength are the:

- Obliques, rectus abdominis, psoas, erector spinae, plus use of core muscles including the transversus abdominis
- Rhomboids, lower trapezius, serratus anterior & latissimus dorsi to depress and retract the scapulae and extend the humerus at the shoulder joint; the levator scapulae, upper trapezius and pectoralis minor may require stretching as if tight will cause the scapulae to lift towards the ear and keep them protracted.
- Quadriceps to extend the knees, esp. rectus femoris which crosses the hip joint and keeps the hips in neutral extension, hamstrings to keep extending through the heels
- Triceps brachii to lower down and keep the upper arm extended against gravity

This means the use of staging over a long period of time is necessary.

Stages:

We can potentially teach the following and students can of course stay with a previous stage if they are not ready to perform Chataranga Dandasana when it is taught:

- Can stand with hands against a wall to feel how the hands, arms, shoulders, and scapulae can be placed (as described below)
- Be aware of how it feels to depress and retract the scapulae perhaps in poses such as Dandasana or Bhujangasana
- Work extensively in Kumbhakasana, the plank
- Work with a version of Majrasana, the cat, where we keep knees to the floor as we slowly lower the upper body with good alignment

Overall Chataranga Dandasana requires very good self-awareness and balanced strength and flexibility; it must be treated with great respect and whilst there are few yoga injuries certainly many of the injuries in yoga have arisen through the improper practice of this asana.

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- Generally we enter the pose via Kumbhakasana, Plank Pose.
- Hands placed beneath shoulders, toes tucked underneath, looking downwards to the floor
- Exhaling lowering the whole body downwards with control, keeping elbows tucked in to sides of body, shoulders down away from ears, i.e. humeral head towards waist or heels.
- Keep legs strong and slightly inwardly rotated; maintain an active core
- Check the breath is flowing easily
- To exit can release to the ground or enter up facing or down facing dog.

Note: Weakness in this pose is usually shown **by flexion at the hips and/or lumbar hyperextension, by the inability to keep the elbows tucked in or the scapulae fixed in a neutral position.** We should approach this posture gradually taking a step-by-step approach, ensuring good alignment is maintained at all times.

To avoid injury

- Remember the scapulae stabilize the shoulder joint and so we must be careful to correctly position the scapulae. They need to be **depressed i.e. drawn down towards the waist. Also retracted i.e. drawn together towards the midline of the body**, particularly at the lower points.
- Also be aware of the positioning of the head of the humerus; here the **humerus is in extension**, i.e. lying alongside the side of the body but we can aid the stability of the shoulder girdle by consciously drawing the **head of the humerus towards the waist** and also **externally rotate the shoulder joint**.
- Also when lowering from plank keep the **elbows tucked into the sides of the body** so you can feel the triceps brachii working eccentrically and are not overly reliant upon the strength of the chest muscles, the pectorals. It can be helpful to **imagine you are pressing elbows downwards towards the floor**
- The placement of the hands is very significant so try placing hands beneath shoulders so the forearm is perpendicular to the floor, this is helpful because muscles always work more efficiently when working in their natural plane.

Activity: *Whilst standing hands to a wall, flexing arms forwards to shoulder height allowing the scapula to be protracted (drawn forwards) and then try to push away an imaginary object and you will find there is little strength available. Now with arms in the same position depress and retract your scapula and again push forwards and hopefully you will find there is now good strength!*

Bibliography:

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