**Virabhadrasana I (Warrior 1)**

# *Pronounced veer-ubh-huh-draa-suh-nuh kuh the word ‘vira’ means ‘hero or warrior’ with the name ‘virabhadra’ referring to a mythological warrior whose hair fell to the ground and gave rise to an army. Interestingly in yoga and hinduism in general the thighs were always symbolic of strength and courage and this pose certainly entails use of the thighs!*

This pose is taught very regularly in most classes and as such we need to ensure that is being practiced correctly for each individual.

As our ‘classical’ version we shall explore the version of the pose where we start in Tadasana, and then place the front foot directly forwards, keeping feet at hip-width apart. This version does not create a twisting action at the lower back or torque across the sacro-iliac joints unlike the version where the front heel aligns with the rear instep.

**Teaching Points:**

* **Entrance:** From Tadasana, Mountain Pose, step the right foot forwards and turn the left foot out around 45º. Keep both hips facing forwards as the feet are placed at the most appropriate stride.
* Make sure the rear foot is firmly down against the floor, if necessary place a block beneath the heel if it lifts.
* Keeping the torso upright bend the front knee and check the knee is aligned with the foot and positioned over the ankle, not forwards of the ankle.
* Check there is equal weight distribution between the two feet
* Engage mula bandha, feeling the whole spine extend, sternum lifted, connecting downwards through the legs and feet, activating both legs
* Inhaling raise arms out to sides, palms down, exhaling
* Inhaling again, turn palms upwards as raise arms to the vertical position, palms facing inwards towards one another
* **Stay**: breathing steadily, simultaneously exploring the connections downwards and upwards, keeping both legs & feet active, the spine long, front of torso engaged; check that the lower ribs are not overly flared creating compression within the lower thoracic vertabrae where they meet the lumbar vertebrae
* Explore the position of the tailbone where a natural backbend allows the tailbone to lift, but if there is any discomfort in the lower back then see if tucking the tailbone underneath a little helps to alleviate any strain or discomfort
* Keep spaciousness around the neck, shoulders down away from ears, if needed take arms a little further apart and can bend elbows a little; keep arms ar shoulder level or on the hips if necessary.
* If possible, keeping the neck long, look upwards between the hands
* Gradually see if it is possible to deepen the pose taking hips down to the level of the front knee, repositioning the feet as needed; staying with hips higher than knees if needed.
* **To exit:** inhaling straighten the front leg reaching upwards, and exhaling lower the arms to sides.
* Practicing to the other side

**Good preparation**

Back strengtheners, spinal mobilisers, abdominal activators, chest openers, shoulder mobilisers, hip flexor stretches, hip mobilisers, ankle mobilisers, hamstring strengtheners, twists and simple backbends

**Cautions & possible modifications**

* **Back conditions such as disc injuries, sacroiliac problems and sciatica:** reduce distance between feet if needed & ensure hips are forward facing to avoid twisting at low back and sacroiliac joints.
* **For spondylosis where the discs have degenerated or thinned:** then backbends can aggravate the condition so we must proceed carefully minimising the depth of backbend by keeping feet closer together (narrow stance)
* **Knee conditions:** keep aligned, reducing depth of flexion as needed
* **Heart conditions, hypertension**: do not keep arms overhead as this makes the heart work harder; do not overwork, resting as necessary
* **Pregnancy**: intense backbends are contraindicated so keep feet closer together and focus upon lifting and opening the chest & shoulders

#### General Modifications:

Reduce length of stride

Block beneath rear heel

Keep arms in a lower position

**Variations & Developments:**

***Balancing Warrior 1***

Turn the rear foot to face forwards and come on to toes.

***Alter arm position***

For instance cactus arms, eagle arms, palms together, use of mudra etc.

***Alter method of entering & exiting the pose***

For instance from Adho Mukha Svanasana (Down Facing Dog), Parsvottanasana (Flank Stretch) etc.

**Iyengar type Warrior I**

Here the front foot heel is aligned with the heel or arch of the rear foot so we stand as if along a single line. Now the rear hip must work harder to be drawn forwards and for many students it will not be possble to square both hips to the front, especially due to tight hip flexors (Psoas & Rectus femoris) leading to potential asymmetrical pressure upon spinal discs and strain across sacroiliac joints. Also students must be guided to utilise their adductors to maintain balance within the pose.

***Inherently Vulnerable Areas***

This version must be taught with great care giving pointers regarding vulnerable areas for consideration; to include the low back, sacroiliac joints, knees and neck. Ideally we will primarily focus on the first version with feet placed hip-width apart as this possesses much more mechanical integrity for the vast majority of students. It is sometimes taught to more experienced students who know their own capacities and often in sequences.

**Benefits:**

* Builds strength and endurance
* Tones & strengthens the legs, ankles and feet
* Therapeutic for knees as strengthens muscles around them
* Strengthens & stretches the back
* Opens chest & shoulders
* Strengthens abdominal muscles
* Gives energy, counteracting low energy states
* Creates feeling of openness and confidence

#### Adjustments:

* Check hips are forwards facing, can place hands on hips and press down inviting the student to resist the movement, which will engage the legs
* Can release shoulders by placing hand gently on the top of shoulders; students may need to take arms wider with elbows bent to keep this area open.
* Can place a hand at the thoracic region of the back and ask the student to lift up into the palm
* Can anchor the pose by holding around the back ankle inviting students to internally rotate the back leg.

Online image from: <https://www.ekhartyoga.com/articles/why-we-practise-the-warrior-poses> (accessed 7.08.18)

© S Beck August 2021

Can you give the main teaching points?

