



# Karuna Yoga Newsletter

Issue no: 17

June 2008

## Forward Bends

Forward bends can be wonderfully relaxing and introspective but they can strain your lower back if the backs of your legs are tight. Learning to do forward bends correctly will keep your back safe from harm. It is necessary to pay close attention to the hamstrings, which are located at the backs of your thighs.

Doing straight-leg forward bends like Paschimottanasana (seated forward bend with straight legs) and Janu Sirsasana (seated forward bend with one leg bent out to the side) is an excellent way to stretch your hamstrings.

A good way to check whether you should bend forward in these forward bending postures is to first do the posture – Supta Padangusthasana. This is where you lie on your back, lift your right leg up and catch your foot with a belt. You then straighten your right leg making sure your right knee is not bent and your left leg is straight on the floor. If you can make a 90-degree angle between your right leg and your torso, you can safely sit in Dandasana (straight leg sitting posture). If you can't bring the leg to perpendicular then you need to sit on a block in Dandasana to tip your pelvis forward and to stop you slumping forward. Just sit in this posture without bending forward until your hamstrings have stretched.

So before doing sitting forward bends you should have at least 90 degrees in Supta Padangusthasana. If you don't, you risk hurting your back. So take time to improve your hamstring flexibility by working on stretching the legs using a belt. Be careful when you bend forward in seated postures because if you go too far, the forward movement will come from your lower back, possibly causing strain or injury.

If your hamstrings are tight an excellent way to loosen them is to contract the quadriceps (the big muscles at the front of your thighs). The quadriceps will stabilize your knees and hold them straight in forward bends.

And finally, a word about patience. The hamstrings are layered with lots of tough connective tissue – the gristly fibres that help hold the muscles' structure together. So you can't rush or hurry the hamstrings into flexibility. They need time to change their length. The longer stretches of between 90 to 120 seconds seem to be most effective with connective tissue. It can take months or years for tight hamstrings to loosen their grip and become flexible. So be patient, relax and enjoy the stretching.

## The Importance of Feet

This month we'll be taking care of our feet by practicing foot exercises. Stretching the toes and bringing more awareness to the feet will help to improve your standing postures. These exercises also improve the blood flow to the feet and improve circulation.

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## Posture of the Month – Paschimottanasana (intense back stretch)

The back of your body, from your heels to your head, is known as *paschim*, which means “west” in Sanskrit. *Ut* indicates “intense”, while *tan* means “stretch”. This asana stretches the length of your spine, allowing the life force to flow to every part of your body. Resting your forehead on your knees calms the active front brain and keeps the meditative back brain quiet, yet alert.

1. Sit in Dandasana with your legs together, your back straight and your hands at the sides of your hips.
2. Stretch your heels, ensuring that both are pressed down.
3. Take a few deep breaths.
4. Stretch your arms above your head with the palms facing each other, stretching your spine upward and lifting up out of your hips.
5. **Intermediates:** exhale and stretch your arms toward your feet. Grip the big toes of your feet with the first two fingers and thumbs of both hands. Press your thighs down on the floor. The pressure on the thighs should be greater than that on your calves. This helps you stretch more effectively.
6. **Beginners:** focus on keeping your thighs flat on the floor. You must not allow them to lift off the floor. This is more important than holding your toes. Hold a belt around your feet if necessary.
7. Make sure you are sitting on your inner buttock bones and that your weight is distributed equally on them. Do not allow either buttock to rise off the floor.
8. **Intermediates:** either hold your right wrist with your left hand or hold the soles of your feet with the interlocked fingers of both hands. Exhale and lift your torso. Bend forward from your lower back, keeping your spine concave. Stretch forward from both sides of the waist. Place your forehead on your knees and then push it toward your shins. Widen and lift your elbows. Do not allow them to rest on the floor.
9. **Beginners:** keep holding the belt around your feet and do not pull yourself further forward. Place blocks or bolsters on your legs and rest your head on these.
10. Hold this posture for one minute.
11. Always come back to Dandasana before starting another sitting posture.

### Contraindications and Cautions

- Do not practise this asana during, or just after, an asthmatic attack
- Avoid this posture if you have diarrhoea
- Do not allow your thighs to lift off the floor, as the muscles at the backs of your knees might rupture.

### Benefits of this posture

- Rests and massages the heart
- Soothes the adrenal glands
- Tones the kidneys, bladder and pancreas
- Activates a sluggish liver and improves the digestive system
- Helps to treat impotence
- Stimulates the ovaries, uterus, and the entire reproductive system

