

the balanced sun salutation

THE SUN PROVIDES MUCH to this planet and its inhabitants. It is, among other things, a source of light, warmth and nutrient synthesis; to humans, it even provides mood elevation. Not surprisingly, many cultures have worshipped and held the sun sacred. These same cultures declare that one's body is a temple which should also be honoured. One way to pay homage to both body and sun is to perform a flowing series of yoga poses known as the Balanced Sun Salutation.

Many people have heard of, or experienced, some form of Sun Salutation, as it is very common in more fitness-oriented hatha yoga styles. It may be performed toward the beginning of a yoga class as a warm up, or interwoven throughout the beginning and middle portions to produce and maintain elevated metabolic responses, including an increase in body temperature. Like the sun, the Sun Salutation is HOT!

What is a Sun Salutation?

A Sun Salutation (one of three traditional yoga salutations, including the 'grounding' Earth Salutation and the 'cooling' Moon Salutation) is a series of poses which begins and ends with the same pose, Mountain Pose, so that one may seamlessly perform the series multiple times. The sequence moves from one pose to the next at the speed of the breath; it has specific phases of breath (an inhalation or exhalation) associated with each pose.

Origin

Most agree that Sun Salutations, or in Sanskrit, *Surya Namaskar* (*surya* = sun, *namas* = to bow to), came about thousands of years ago in India as a way to honour both the morning sun and one's own body. Some variations of the poses have come about since its inception, but one thing has remained consistent: multiple repetitions of the flowing series.

Perform, sweat, repeat

Repeating a Sun Salutation series two to six times is most common (and most appropriate for those new to yoga). Some yoga disciplines suggest that a more advanced practice could include repetition of the Sun Salutation 108 times, or some fraction of that number. The number 108 represents numerological and/or spiritual significance for some, and is often used for that reason.

Benefits for body and mind

The benefits of performing Sun Salutations are basically the

same as those derived from any yoga practice, including an increase in range of motion, strength, kinesthetic awareness, balance and coordination.

Also, in those performing yogic movements such as Sun Salutations, something called the Relaxation Response is typically triggered due to the associated focused breathing and repetitive movements. The Relaxation Response is considered to be the opposite of the chemically damaging 'Fight or Flight' stress response, and must be *purposefully* elicited in humans.

Original versus the Balanced Sun Salutation

The original Sun Salutation includes only three directions of spinal movement: neutral spine, spinal flexion, and spinal extension. This means that all directions of human spinal movement are not represented. However, the Balanced Sun Salutation, does address all directions of spinal movement, including spinal rotation and spinal lateral flexion. This series of movements, then, celebrates all directions of spinal movement, trunk muscle preparation and activation.

Also, the transitions from the first to the second Downward Facing Dog have been modified to reflect a more natural movement, which can be simpler to follow and may help to decrease the incidence of shoulder strain and/or injury.

The Balanced Sun Salutation series

- Stand in Mountain Pose ([photo 1](#)).
- Inhale and sweep arms overhead, bringing palms together. Exhale while leaning to the right into Standing Moon ([photo 2](#)).
- Inhale back to centre and repeat Standing Moon to the left on exhale ([photo 3](#)).
- Inhale back to centre and exhale into Swan Dive, sweeping arms out to sides ([photo 4](#)) and all the way down into Forward Fold ([photo 5](#)).
- Inhale, step the RIGHT foot back and drop the knee gently to the floor into Kneeling Lunge on exhale. Inhale and sweep both arms out to sides and up ([photo 6](#)).
- Exhale, and press palms together in front of heart, revolving the trunk into a twist to the left, over the bent knee for Kneeling Twisting Lunge ([photo 7](#)).
- Inhale and place both hands on the floor, on either side of the front foot, and exhale, stepping both feet back into Downward Facing Dog ([photo 8](#)).
- Inhale and begin to move forward with a slightly rounded spine ([photo 9](#)).



- Exhale and move into Plank with a neutral spine (photo 10).
- Inhale while staying on the tiptoes, moving into spinal hyperextension for Upward Facing Dog (photo 11).
- Exhale and push back into Downward Facing Dog again (photo 12).
- Inhale and step the RIGHT foot all the way forward, so the ankle lines up with both wrists, and drop the back knee gently to the floor for Kneeling Lunge on exhale. Inhale and sweep both arms out to sides and up (photo 13).
- Exhale, and press palms together in front of heart, revolving the trunk into a twist to the right, over the bent knee for Kneeling Twisting Lunge (photo 14).
- Inhale and place both hands on the floor, on either side of the front foot, and exhale, stepping both feet forward into

- Forward Fold (photo 15).
- Inhale and place both hands on shins, extending the spine into Monkey Pose (photo 16).
- Exhale and sweep arms out and up, while 'sitting' back into Chair Pose, moving weight into the heels (photo 17).
- Inhale and come back to standing upright. Exhale into Mountain Pose (photo 18), placing hands together again, in front of the heart.
- Repeat, leading with the LEFT foot this time.

Finish with resting

At the end of the desired number of repetitions of the Balanced Sun Salutation, set aside at least a couple of minutes for rest, to allow for physical and mental stillness. This should be done in a quiet area, while standing in

CONTRAINDICATIONS

Because there are partially inverted poses in this series (Forward Fold and Downward Facing Dog), those with infection in the head area (sinus, throat, etc.), glaucoma or hypertension, or those who are pregnant should avoid this series, unless advised otherwise by a doctor.

Practitioners should become familiar with the poses one at a time, practice all poses in a pain-free range, move at the speed of the breath, perform only the number of Balanced Sun Salutations appropriate for them, and always stop and rest, if needed. If practicing outside, one should take care not to become too overheated.



Mountain Pose or, even better, while lying down in Resting Pose (supine with knees bent or with legs straightened). Don't forget, rest is as important as movement!

Now let the sun shine

There is a built-in, daily cue to perform this series; it shows itself every day around dawn. Whether inside or outside, the next time that the light of day is seen, let it serve as a reminder to honour self and sun by enjoying the Balanced Sun Salutation. ■



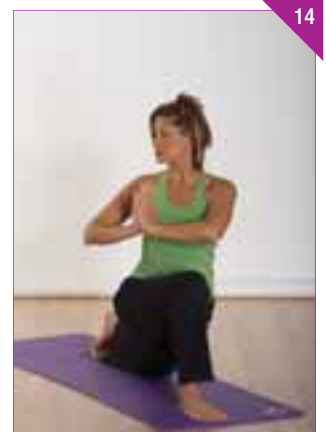
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Co-creator of the flow-yoga® teacher training program, DeDe has been a certified group exercise instructor since 1986 and registered yoga teacher with the Yoga Alliance at their highest level since 2002. DeDe contributes to numerous fitness publications and is co-author of The Power Reactor™ Fitness and Conditioning Program. DeDe works one-on-one with clients and teaches classes in her native South Bay area of Los Angeles. For more information, visit www.flow-yoga.com



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