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## PASCHIMOTTANASANA ~Great Western Stretch

- *It's fundamental principles*

Forward bending asanas are renowned for being quietening, cooling and soothing to the body and mind (class notes). They are also known for being calming; however paschimottanasana can often bring emotions up for people, or it can be challenging for extroverted people who struggle with very introverted activities, so this is not always the case!

- *The structural and functional physiology involved*

Paschimottanasana gives an intense stretch to the entire back of the body (Class notes). It stretches the hamstring muscles and increases flexibility in the hip joints (Sarawati, 1996). It stretches and straightens the spine, returning it to its correct alignment. It regenerates the intervertebral cartilages (Sri Vidya, 2004). And it stimulates circulation to each of these areas, in particular, the nerves and muscles of the spine. This is only enhanced by having the heart at approximately the same level as the head (reducing pressure on the cardiovascular system). This extra blood flow can then calm and balance the brain and nervous system.

The other important benefit of paschimottanasana, is that it tones and massages the abdomen and digestive organs: Including the liver, pancreas, spleen, kidneys, and adrenal glands. Thus digestion and elimination through the Gastrointestinal tract are improved (class notes). Paschimottanasana is also beneficial for the reproductive system (particularly in women as it is an internal system).

- *The yogic or subtle physiology involved*

Chakras – this asana opens up through the back vortex of each chakra. A particular focus, however, is on svadhsthana chakra (Sarawati, 1996). Stafforini (2004) reports that this pose is believed to be associated with mastery over the energy of this centre. Svadhsthana chakra houses our sexuality, creativity, and

our feeling states. Often our shadow aspects can be found here. Perhaps this is why paschimottanasana often brings up emotions for people.

Koshas – Over time, the student can work through the sheaths.

Knowledge/awareness of the physical body (annamaya kosha) and awareness of likes, dislikes, or tension (manomaya kosha), through to awareness of pranic movement (pranamaya kosha), insights associated with vijnanamaya kosha, and eventually to the effortless effort and bliss of anandamaya kosha

Nadis & Prana – clears energy blockages created through stress, tension, and poor posture. Thus the movement of prana vayu can flow more easily through the nadi's, in particular sarasvati nadi (Sri Vidya, 2004).

(Class notes, yogic physiology)

- *How it relates to other asanas in the group, and how it may be sequenced in a practise or class*

Forward bending asanas tend to be more cooling and calming, and so tend to be incorporated towards the end of practise (class notes).

In preparation for practising this asana, it may be useful to bring the student's awareness to different actions during other asanas.

Eg.

Sukhasana (sitting and coming forward)– bending at the hips, becoming aware of the sit bones

Uttanasana with hands at opposite elbow/Padahastanasana – for the above reasons, also for engaging the quads to lift the knees, lengthening the spine, broadening the sacral area and shoulders

Tadasana – awareness of feet, engaging muscles of legs, engaging core muscles, broadening across sacrum and backs of shoulders, lifting up and lengthening through entire spine.

Majariasana – to warm spine

Lateral stretches – to warm spine

In terms of sequencing, Saraswati (1996) recommends this asana precedes or follows back bending asanas as it acts as a counter-pose (eg. For setu bandhasana, bhujangasana, chakrasana etc).

When it comes time to practise paschimottanasana, most teachers get students to begin in dandasana (the foundation of all seated poses). Paschimottanasana is a forward bending extension of dandasana. Thus beginning in dandasana, allows students to put together all the aforementioned actions, and also it creates an awareness of their body's own correct alignment.

- *Variations according to needs and major pre-cautions and/or contra-indications*

As paschimottanasana opens up through the entire back side of the body, it requires length and opening through the major muscle groups, and also through the hips. For people who are quite tight through the backs of the legs (in particular the hamstrings), keeping the knees bent can often prevent the student rounding their spine, and putting pressure on the lower back. Alternatively, a strap can be used, so the student does not feel the need to lean as far forward.

However, people who suffer from a slipped disc or sciatica should not practise this asana at all (Saraswati, 1996). The other precaution is for individuals experiencing chronic depression. This asana is quite an introverted asana, and for these individuals, it may be preferable to work more with back bending asanas that lift and open through the heart centre, and are more extroverted. For these students, when forward bends may be required (to balance other asanas), perhaps practising those asanas which are not so closed in would be preferable (ie. Janu sirsasana, upavista konasana, uttanasana...).

- *Main indications for adjustment*

Having begun to practise some asanas with my partner (who is not particularly flexible...), I was quickly taken back to my first yoga experiences. I remembered (aside from not being able to touch my toes), that when it came to the forward bends I couldn't help but inwardly groan. My legs and lower back would hurt, I couldn't touch my toes, and I was too busy concentrating on trying to touch my toes that I would forget to keep my feet active. All of this is relatively easy to see in other people now (having noticed it in myself), and can be adjusted through verbal instruction (ie. "lifting your buttocks away so that your sit bones come more into contact with the floor", "bend from the hips, rather than the lower back" – often a demonstration of the difference can be useful, "lengthen through the spine before coming forward", and even encouraging people to let go of the end result – touching their toes, and concentrate on the process of coming forward and broadening, particularly across the shoulders, as well as lengthening through the spine and backs of the legs (santosa!)).

One adjustment I received which helped enormously was to rotate my thighs in and down towards the floor, which broadened across my sacrum, and then taking the tops of my thighs (at the hip/groin area) and rotating/broadening them outwards. This creates a two way action. Although seemingly complicated, the benefit was that it helped me develop an awareness of opening through the hips.

## References

Class Notes, Asana Class. 2004

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Stafforini, P. (2004). Yoga: Paschimottanasana. [www.stafforini.com/yoga/paschimottanasana](http://www.stafforini.com/yoga/paschimottanasana). 18/08/2004.

Sri Vidya (2004). Paschimottanasana. Sri Vidya, hindu yoga and tantra cultures magazine. [www.hinduism.it/pasch.htm](http://www.hinduism.it/pasch.htm). 18/08/2004.

CAE Yogic physiology class notes