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Adho Mukha Svanasana

~ Downward Facing Dog Pose

Adho Mukha Svanasana is often referred to as the 'whole body' pose (Bournstein, 2004). Through practising this asana, the student becomes mindful of different parts, of the alignment, and also of the interconnectedness of each part of their body.

Adho Mukha Svanasana has aspects of a forward bend, a standing pose, and an inversion (Bournstein, 2004), and as such has many of the benefits associated with each.

The Benefits

The most significant benefits of adho mukha svanasana come from its ability to re-align the physical body, to strengthen the muscles and joints and to create space.

As we mentioned above, strengthening the muscles creates tone, which enables this aligned posture to be maintained in everyday movements. Also weight-bearing exercises such as these strengthen bone density, making bones thicker, stronger and more adaptable, preventing against degeneration, brittleness and diseases like osteoporosis (Martini, 1998).

The foundation points of the pose, both the hands and feet, require the establishment of a firm base to support the rest of the body. From this foundation, the student begins to lengthen and ultimately strengthen the muscles and joints through the entire body (class notes). (From the hands, to the wrists, to the arms, to the shoulders, the upper, middle and lower back, the vertebrae, the waist, the buttocks, the thighs, the quadriceps to strengthen knee stability, the backs of the legs, the hamstrings, the calves, through the ankles, to the feet). Each point builds upon the last, with the aim of creating a straight line (and thus a re-alignment) from the hands, through the shoulders, hips to the sit bones (which form the apex), down through the backs of the legs to the heels (Bornstein, 2004). Whilst length is important here, so is broadness (through the shoulders and the hips), as this opens up through the thoracic cavity, and strengthens the diaphragm, all of which improve the respiratory and cardiovascular systems (as noted above). It also creates space through the pelvic region, for the abdominal organs, the urinary tract (for more efficient filtering in the kidney, and elimination of waste products through the bladder and urethra) and the reproductive system (particularly for women as these organs/glands are predominantly internal) (Martini, 1998).

As the student's strength builds through the muscles and joints, a sense of ease can be established in the asana that enables tension to be released from anywhere it's being held, whether that be the shoulders, the back, the hips...etc. By releasing tension, space is created for more efficient circulation, lymphatic drainage, and communication (neural and hormonal/endocrine) (Martini, 1998).

Similar to setu bandhasana, adho mukha svanasana is a gentle inversion. This brings with it the benefits mentioned above, in terms of the reduced pressure on the heart and circulatory system. It also increases the blood flow to the brain. This increased blood flow brings fresh oxygen and nutrients to the brain, ensuring the active parts of the brain work more efficiently. It is believed that the autonomic nervous system is re-balanced during the practise of this asana (Bornstein, 2004). The autonomic nervous system comprises the sympathetic (fight or flight) and parasympathetic (rest and repose) nervous systems (Martini, 1998). Both systems are always functioning, but one always predominates (Martini, 1998). Thus practising this asana, with its need for strength and activity, it's relaxed, rhythmical breathing, and "ideally" effortless effort, can balance the two nervous systems. (This is ideal for me, as I often have an overactive sympathetic nervous system, and an under active parasympathetic nervous system - I worry too much!).

Adho Mukha Svanasana is one of my favourite asanas. It is the one asana I can almost get that sense of effortlessness in. But with all of these benefits, I can see why my body loves it so much too.

References:

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