



YOGA



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## ANATOMY OF AN ASANA

Extended Sides Angle Pose (Utthita Parsvakonasana)

By **Sally Parkes**

Photos: Ali Wardle [www.aliwardlephotography.co.uk](http://www.aliwardlephotography.co.uk)

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Within the physical yoga system there are several yoga postures (or 'asanas' in Sanskrit) which will generally be found in all yoga classes, no matter what yoga style you opt for. Extended Sides Angle Pose or 'Utthita Parsvakonasana' as it is traditionally known, is one of these asanas and will be taught in most yoga classes. It is a strong compound posture that has many benefits and whilst it looks relatively easy in comparison to some advanced yoga asanas, it is actually very easy to do Extended Side Angle pose incorrectly and lose the essence of the posture, which is to create space within the body.





The bent leg uses the quadriceps and hip flexors (muscles at the top front of your thigh) whilst the hamstrings stabilise. The extended leg again uses the quadriceps as well as the abductor and adductor muscles (muscles on the inside and outside of the thighs) although this is in a more isometric (held) manner.

As the torso is at an angle the internal and external obliques (rotating abdominal muscles) are lengthening on the extended side whilst contracting on the side closest to the bent leg. They also help to stabilise the torso along with the latissimus dorsi (muscles on the sides of your back) and erector spinae (lower back muscles). Once the top arm is extended over the head the latissimus dorsi on this side also begins to lengthen and the shoulder joint begins to open. Therefore bio-mechanically there is a lot going on in this asana and so it should be moved into gradually through stages to gain maximum benefits.

#### Benefits of Extended Side Angle Pose:

- **Physiological:** Due to the intensity of the asana, the heart rate is increased and the nervous system stimulated
- Respiration is therefore also increased which helps to increase lung capacity
- **Psychological:** Increases clarity of thought and alertness

#### Step-by-Step

Step the feet approximately 1.5 metres apart. Raise your arms parallel to the floor and reach them actively out to the sides with the shoulders drawing downwards and the palms of the hands turned down. Turn the left foot in slightly to the right and your right foot out to the right 90-degrees. Align the right heel with the left heel and externally rotate the right thigh outwards, so that the centre of the patella is in line with the centre of the right ankle. Anchor the left heel to the floor by pressing down firmly with the outer edge of the foot. This will help lift and strengthen the arch of the foot as well as lengthening the outer leg muscles (in particular the Peroneus Longus and Iliotibial Band) and allow for a strong contraction of the quadriceps and ensures the knee is stable. Then exhale and bend the right knee over the right ankle, so that the shin is perpendicular to the floor and track the outer knee towards the outside edge of the foot. If the hips allow for it, bring the right thigh parallel to the floor but do not force the pelvis lower if the muscles of the hips are not very open as this may cause injury to the groin area.

Now laterally flex the lower spine towards the right so the spine is at an angle and the right forearm can be placed on the right thigh. Maintain the length of the spine whilst

extending the left arm straight upwards before rotating from the shoulder joint and reaching the arm over the left ear, palm facing to the ground. Lengthen the entire left side of the body and release the shoulders away from the ears.

Next allow the right hand to lower down to the ground (or onto a yoga block) on the inside of the right thigh. Actively push the right arm into the right inner leg to help open the hip but ensure the right thigh is still parallel with the edge of the yoga mat.

Breathing deeply, hold for thirty to sixty seconds before inhaling and coming up to the start position. Push both heels strongly into the floor and reach the left arm upwards as you do so to lighten the upward movement. Reverse the feet and repeat for the same length of time to the left. Then come up and return to standing.

#### Technical Points:

For extra work in the legs and a greater sense of 'groundedness', press both feet firmly into the ground as though you are pulling your yoga mat in opposite directions. This will help to engage the adductors and pelvic floor muscles.

Keep a sense of lifting and lengthening out of the waist and hips throughout the upper body. This will help to create space in the pelvis and avoid too much compression into the right hip.

Tuck the left hip under a little to encourage external rotation of the right side of the body. This will help to create space within the torso. Keep the shoulders drawing down away from the neck.

The left resting lightly onto the floor or yoga block: Do not allow the arm to take much weight as this tends to hinder the required muscle recruitment of the torso and legs.

#### Be extra careful in this pose if you have:

- Neck problems: Ensure you look straight ahead with the sides of the neck lengthened evenly, or look down at the floor
- Knee injuries: To avoid undue pressure on the injured knee, do not aim to lower the thigh parallel to the floor on the bent side

#### Avoid this asana if you have:

- Groin strain
- High blood pressure

For more info on Sally:

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To gain the benefits of this posture a sense of lengthening the torso and grounded strength through the legs and feet must be achieved. This allows the organs and respiratory system to work effectively as they have more space to function and the joints, in particular the pelvis, spine and shoulders, can really open up and increase their range of motion whilst gaining stability.

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