

Truth is a Quiet Thing

Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

As a professional performing artist for 10 years in musical theatre, I adored the process of making a show. The rehearsal process meant learning and honing new music and choreography, drilling it to as close to perfection as possible, and of course making new friends, and acquiring new skills. But nothing...no thing compared to the moment the curtain went up and there was an audience. My kicks were higher, smile broader, adrenaline coursing through my body and my voice felt more expansive than ever.

So it was quite a shock for me to take my first yoga class, and truth be told, I didn't much appreciate it. Where were the mirrors? How would I know if I was doing the poses right? Without my body to look at, and my voice to listen to, how would I know my place in this practice? **How would I recognize myself?** As a dancer, I thought I would nail the postures at first try. I would only later learn that I had it all wrong. To say that I was humbled is an understatement.

Initially, I used yoga as another place to critique my actions. There was one pose in particular that I especially dreaded but found to be a part of every class I took no matter who the teacher was. And not surprisingly (in hindsight of course!), this pose became the doorway for me through which I began to understand what this practice can be about, and *Uttanasana*, or Standing Forward Bend, became **one of my greatest teachers**.

Uttanasana, literally translated as "Intense Stretch Pose" (and so true!), seemed easy for me in the dance world. Just stand up and then bend forward and touch your toes. Easy. In Yoga, I have learned that *Uttanasana*, requires a vast amount of internal **honesty to practice not only safely but meaningfully**. By honesty, I mean that yoga doesn't care if you can touch your toes or how far forward you bend. It has more to do with the thought put into the pose, rather than attaining a goal.

Among the many benefits of *Uttanasana*:

- Relieves stress and "resets" the brain
- Opens the back of the legs/strengthens thighs and knees
- Reduces fatigue and anxiety
- Relieves headaches, insomnia, and symptoms of menopause
- Improves digestion

Uttanasana*: Standing Forward Bend (Intense Stretch Pose)

- Stand with feet hip width apart (for very tight hamstrings, a little wider), lift toes and engage the leg muscles
- On an inhale, raise your arms overhead and elongate your spine and lengthen your torso
- On an exhale, bend forward keeping the spine straight and long, releasing your arms down towards the floor
- If you feel intense tightness in the backs of your legs, bend your knees OR bring the floor up to you by placing your hands on blocks or stacks of books (or both!)
- With each inhale lift and lengthen the front torso just a little, and with each exhale release a little more into the bend
- To come out of the pose, on an inhale press your feet into the floor and drop your tailbone as you rise up bringing your hands overhead
- Exhale as you bring your arms back down to your sides to the starting position

* Those with low back problems should not practice *Uttanasana* without an experienced yoga teacher

The Broader Concept

Yes, there is anatomy involved in *Uttanasana*, talk of ankles, knees, and hips, among other things that may come up in a group class or private session. But there also tends to be a great deal of internal chatter, such as, "When will this be over?" "Why can't I be more flexible?" "Why does this hurt so much?" And one I hear often, "I used to be able to do this..."

The point is, in yoga, none of that matters. What all of the chatter boils down to in *Uttanasana* is the simple observation, "My hamstrings are tight." That's it. And then you practice.

It doesn't mean anything about you as a person, how old you've become, or how you "should" do this or that. It's nothing more than an observation, unattached to any particular meaning; not for an audience to applaud, not even for an end result, but primarily to find a quiet truth to check in and observe your thoughts and to notice your response to your practice.



Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT, is a licensed social worker and certified yoga teacher. She provides private yoga instruction, individual cognitive focused counseling, and integrative mind-body work. Additionally, she facilitates mind-body workshops and educational seminars on reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Alena's approach takes into account negative thought patterns, eating habits, sleep hygiene, and body image. She currently provides mind-body counseling in an outpatient wellness center at NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases, and yoga therapy on an inpatient surgical unit at Beth Israel Medical Center.

If you are interested in learning more about yoga, stress reduction, and wellness, please contact Alena.

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