

Water, Mud & Thorns

On Iyengar Yoga & Running

success in circuit lies... Emily Dickinson

Aruna's Aṅga-Jōga

(For Mohan)

Not Chasing Day
Nor Fleeing Night
Spring Right to Wing Left
& Spring Left to Wing Right

Bounding Unbounded
Inside & Out
Running – Yet Still –
Amid Belief & Doubt

Where Ten-Thousand Footfalls
Compose a Rondo of One
As Sole Conducts Sole
Betwixt Moon & Sun.

Aruna: Hindu goddess, the charioteer who drives Surya, the sun god, across the sky.

Aṅga [Sanskrit]: limb

Jōga (जोग) [Prakrit]: 'activity'; related to the Sanskrit word *Yoga* (योग)

Rondo: a musical composition of one principal theme, which is repeated at least once.

Starting Out

I, quite literally, fell into running. Some years ago, on a twilight evening, I went to collect our daughter from her school friend's place. The house, near the apex of a hill was accessed by a path that descended from the road. Onto this path obtruded an untended, overgrown, and prickly bush. Upon accidental contact, I lurched leftwards, right off the path, inverting my left ankle in the process, causing two avulsion fractures and a torn lateral ligament complex. I managed the immediate effects of the injury with asana (mainly inversions) and without requiring immobilization. Despite progressively increasing the representation of standing postures (especially one-legged balances) in my yoga practice, I was concerned that these were relatively static and too controlled, thus unable to fully challenge and strengthen dynamic stability. It occurred to me that I could perhaps address potential residual weakness by walking up—and then running down—some of the many and familiar steep fire trails that pattern the lower reaches of nearby *kunanyi* (Mount Wellington). I sensibly wore my trusty Scarpa walking boots for this potentially hazardous exercise. This worked well for my ankle, improving its stability and my confidence, but had an unexpected collateral benefit: I, discovered, quite fortuitously, that I enjoyed running, finding it as engaging, though in different ways, as my yoga practice. [This was quite unexpected because I had flirted for some

weeks with road running many years before, when in my late teens: despite trying diligently, it did not engage me—disappointingly, I experienced it as mechanical, enervating, and boring. It also transiently enhanced my sense of smell immediately afterwards, an odd and disconcerting phenomenon that would persist for around 15 minutes before normalising.] As with the ignition of a yoga practice, running also generates its own momentum: the fire trails from the mountain led onto the road and one day—still wearing the Scarpas—I continued running, discovering new terrain in the process. As running was novel to me and I was fully untrained, I sought the practical guidance of my younger brother, Mohan, a seasoned runner who has sustained a regular long-distance running practice from his late teens that now continues into his late 50's (despite since having had a car accident in his later teens that necessitated a full knee reconstruction, a subsequent operation to remove bothersome surgical staples and, around a decade ago, a second knee reconstruction after a football incident).

guru kunanyi: I surrender to her trials & trails

Current Running Practice

Maintaining my yoga practice over a long time has taught me to be more relaxed regarding practice in general – I now try to find a balance over the range of asana and pranayama over a month rather than a week, and that has been a useful lesson in tempering any tendency to overenthusiasm. This is now my 4th year of running and I run approximately three days per week, varying the terrain and duration and route, incorporating both roads and trails (often both in the one run). Whilst I prefer solitary to group running, in the last two years I have participated in *The Point to Pinnacle* (a half-marathon from Wrest Point Casino, uphill 21kM, to the summit of *kunanyi*), and have joined The Tasmanian Trail Running Association which offers four runs per year on the slopes of *kunanyi* that vary considerably in their length and difficulty. I have my (long-distance) sights set on the 28kM *kunanyi* Mountain Run, an annual event relatively new to Tasmania, and organised with the support and participation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. I would mainly like to run this for the perversely personally appealing reason that 28 is a 'perfect' number (its factors 1,2,4,7,14 sum to 28) [and further, because $28 \times 7 = 196$, the number of the sūtras in *The Yoga Sūtra*]. However, at this stage, I have zero ambition to complete a marathon or ultra-marathon.

Point to Pinnacle preparation - running with no point, no pinnacle

Biomechanics of (Tad)asana and Running

The most intriguing and practically useful resource that Mohan gifted me is a little book, *The Lost Art of Running* by Shane Benzie, a running-anthropologist and long-distance running coach. I have other books on the subject – the inspiring *Finding Your Feet* by Hanny Alston and Tim Noakes' encyclopaedic *Lore of Running*, but Benzie's book, despite having at times an annoyingly proselytizing edge, has the closest empirical correlation to the biomechanics of asana, particularly to Tadasana.

He advocates landing on a tripod: the heel, the big and little toe mounds simultaneously, so that impact is dissipated most evenly. In generating the most effective propulsion—the one that is most stable and uses the least energy—he identifies an 'inner tripod', a non-contact point in the centre of the foot (equidistant from the big and little toe mounds) from where to

lift. He suggests imagining a long train of elastic running up an invisible centre line: from the feet to the navel to the crown of the head, adopting a tall posture that keeps this taut. As much as possible in running, the head is not dropped forward of the chest, so the eyes look straight ahead, towards the horizon. In the same way that the posterior body supports the anterior body in Tadasana, so too in running, the back body is paramount: the back leg and back arm (which is on the opposite side) provide the spring and lift. I have found it very useful when running to imagine a cross emanating from the centre sternum: when this has the sensation being opened (by the action of the back body and the propulsive elasticity of the legs), the effort of running noticeably reduces. As in asana, here sensation guides action. Tadasana emphasizes the vertical axis, and Benzie's suggested technique for increasing running speed is not primarily by increasing either stride length or cadence (the number of steps per minute), but to run 'upwards and forwards' so the legs have room to cycle more efficiently beneath the body. For this he suggests feeling as though the legs end not at the hip level, but much higher, at around T12, using this area (the origin of the psoas) as the hinge for the legs. It is interesting that in *Light on Pranayama*, Iyengar identifies almost the exact same area (L1) as being 'a crucial spot' *used as a fulcrum for stretching the spine vertically and opening the chest sideways to maintain the four pillars of the body (the corners of the torso) on either side*. And, just as we use the sense of hearing to tune the actions in pranayama, Benzie advises turning our senses of hearing and feeling to gauge whether one side lands more heavily than the other, as well as to consciously attune the rhythm of the movements of running with those of the breath.

HORIZON

Relationship of the Standing Padangusthasana Movements to Locomotion

In yoga, the arms and legs are classified as *karmendriyas*, organs of action, and whilst the primary function of the legs' action is unarguably locomotion, it should be noted that in walking, and especially in running, the movements of the arms forward and backwards in the median plane, in synchrony with the contralateral leg, are important for balance and momentum. So much so that in regard to running, Benzie writes: *they may not be in contact with the ground, but our arms are dominant over our legs and set the scene for the cadence and rhythm of our whole-body movement. If we use our arms dynamically, they provide propulsion*.

Standing postures may be considered as the foundation for the other asanas in the corpus of Iyengar yoga and Tadasana is the foundation of the standing postures: in other words, Tadasana stands as the foundation of the foundation. I consider that the various movements of the limbs from Tadasana to Standing Padangusthasana (in both their bent-leg and straight-leg variations) provide, in seed form, the direction for all the other groups of asanas.

In Padangusthasana 1 the movement of the leg in the median plane (bent or straight) is forwards or backwards in relation to the trunk (and additionally seen as the movement of the trunk forward or backward in relation to the lower limbs). This movement becomes evident in the standing postures Parsvotthanasana, Virabhadrasana 1, Virabhadrasana 3, Utthita Padangusthasana 1, Urdhva Prasarita Ekapadasana, Prasarita Padotthanasana, Padangusthasana, Padahasthasana, Uttanasana, standing Urdhva Dhanurasana (and in Ustrasana; Virasana; Danadasana and also in the inversions etc).

In Padangusthasana 2 the leg rotates externally at the hip – seen in Vrksasana, Trikonasana, Ardha Chandrasana, Virabhadrasana 2, Parsvakonasana, Utthita Padangusthasana 2, Ardha Baddha Padmottasana, and in the seated asanas Swastikasana, Baddha Konasana, Bhadrasana etc.

In Padangusthasana 3 there is a movement from one side of the body to the other i.e., this is the twisting action – evident in Garudasana, Parivrtta Trikonasana, Parivrtta Parsvakonasana, Parivrtta Ardha Chandrasana, Utthita Padangusthasana 3, and apparent also in the seated twists etc.

The arms in walking and running move alternately forward and backward in the median plane: the forward-upward movement being related to the shoulder opening required in Urdvha Hastasana, Sirsasana, Adhomukha Vrksasana etc. and the backwards movement to Sarvangasana, Setubhanda, supported supine postures etc.

It is interesting to observe that **the movements of Standing Padangusthasana form an inherent part of locomotion**, whether walking or running. The simplest of return journeys by foot— out from a starting point and then back—defines a circuit. It is not possible to return to the starting point without changing the direction of the body, and this is only possible through the combined movements of the lower limbs as defined in Padangusthasana 1,2 and 3.

Which particular asanas help best to prepare for running will inevitably depend upon the practitioner. Suffice to say, I haven't found any asana to be unhelpful, but for a yoga-naïve runner I would emphasize the broad range of the Standing Poses and the Supta Padangusthasana movements.

Country dance; contradance: left foot-right arm; right foot-left arm

Principles of Running that Overlap with Asana

Cadence

In his Introduction to **Light on Yoga**, BKS Iyengar writes poetically of asana as involving 'the rhythmic balance of the five elements'. This has a direct correlate in running, experienced as rhythmic movement: fire carrying the runner on earth, over water, in air, through space. In running, cadence is technically defined as the number of steps you take per minute (counting both feet), but I have never counted mine, and hope, rather, to experience the musical quality of cadence in running that Iyengar hints of as a possibility in asana.

2/1;4/4;6/8: Fire Up! Steadfast Level; Running Down, Flowing Down

Sva-Rūpa

If, as Prashant Iyengar has observed, maintaining an asana for a period can be considered as a replication of a particular shape (sva-rūpa YS 1.3) from one breath to the next, a steady running rhythm can be seen as analogous to maintaining an asana. When running, I sometimes realize that I am 'running on the spot' whilst the terrain around me moves and changes. Just as when maintaining an asana, readjustments may be periodically needed, so

too in running, a continuous reflection and reshaping in response to the changing terrain is required.

identikit: what fingerprint matches my footprint?

Constants & Variables

Whilst we can denominate a particular asana by its *sva-rūpa*, its ‘own-shape’, in Iyengar Yoga we learn that each asana also exists through a spectrum of possible variations; they are not monolithic. For example, Tadasana at the start of a standing pose sequence is different to Tadasana mid-sequence, and again different to Tadasana at the end of that sequence. Tadasana can be further modified e.g., using specific props, or by varying the leg width. All asanas are modifiable by variables, and whilst Patañjali in YS 2.50 mentions an additional number of variables primarily in relation to pranayama, these are also clearly applicable to asana: *desa* (location – which part is brought to the surface or becomes a locus for action or sensation?), *kala* (duration), *samkyabhih* (number or repetition), *dirgha* (capacity) and *sukmah* (subtlety). In running, these variables manifest externally as route, duration, distance etc, but also include surface type (road or trail), angle of inclination, time of day, season, etc. As in asana, the entire spectrum of intention—from Iyengar’s *thoughtfully* *thoughtless* (or purposefully purposeless), to specific and goal directed—is also a variable.

constant variables - arc-swing, stride length, contact time

Refinement of Effort

Sutra 1.21 can be rendered as ‘for the ardent practitioner, path and goal converge’ and in a parallel sutra, YS 2.47, Patañjali gives a technique that, by its immediate context, seems directed to asana: ‘integration, through refinement of effort’. This is directly applicable not just to running but, in fact, to any skill. He describes the effects of this in a way that makes one wonder whether he might have also have made an adept trail runner: he writes of ‘a freedom of movement over the obstacles of water, mud and thorns’ (YS 3.40), and of ‘a cotton-like lightness to the movements of the body through space’ (YS 3.43), as well as referring to ‘beauty of form and gracefulness of movement’ (YS 3.47).

pace in pace; in pace, pace

Pratyahara, Dharana, Japa

It is an instructive experience to run in the dark, with only a headlamp on. The visible field is confined to what is illuminated, a literal experience of sense-withdrawal (*pratyahara*) and attention becomes confined to within this area (*dharana*). Just as *dharana* in yoga practice can be considered as a series of envelopes-within-envelopes (e.g. the whole sequence, each individual asana, a particular focal point within the asana etc), so too, in running: attention is confined by the run, and then within the run, and can be further confined: to what is occurring in the foot, for example, or the lower legs, or arms, or breath, or senses etc. Patañjali describes the contiguity of *dharana* with *dhyana* and *samadhi* as *samyama* (YS 3.4), and certainly many runners attest to the experience of absorption within the running process where runner, running and run spontaneously coalesce as one. In the introduction to his audio version of *The Yoga-Sūtra*, BKS Iyengar mentions that whilst in *sadhana* he silently articulates the *sūtras*, not only to reflect on their meaning, but also for their use as ‘a timer’

to help maintain the asanas. In this way the sūtras can become a form of japa (YS1.28) and it is interesting in running to observe the spontaneous emergence of phrases ('running mantras') that can help maintain focus and coherence. A repertoire of these can then be consciously used, japa-like, as a means of helping negotiate the obstacles that can arise (such as tiredness, pain, loss of focus) during a run.

uphill mantra: breathing 'Ha Tha' step by step

Niyama/Yama

The relationships between yama, particularly ahimsa, and asana that BSKS Iyengar writes about in *The Tree of Yoga* are also applicable in running, particularly in developing a conscious awareness of where and what might be over- or under-working, contributing to imbalance and difficulty. The central role of svadhyaya, self-awareness, in continuously and dynamically balancing the spectrum that spans between the seemingly opposing poles of tapas (effort/exertion) and surrender (pranidhanani) is also inescapable during running. As Geeta Iyengar has also noted, there is a temporal relation between saucha (akin to tapas, the effort of practice), and santosa, the cultivation of contentment after the diligent efforts within practice, and which can be experienced at the end, particularly within Savasana.

goal ending, goal ending

I find that running is a useful counterbalance to mat-based asana/pranayama practice as, whilst on the mat the larger environment and context in which we live, can recede. BKS Iyengar maintains that 'yoga develops a sense of proportion' and in my experience, running, in suburban and bush environments, helps to foster this sense of proportion, as our place within, and our interactions with, the external environment become inescapable. This is the sphere of yama: how do we, for example, respond to seeing plastic rubbish discarded in the bush? How does a runner interact when crossing other runners, pedestrians, car drivers, animals? It is not surprising that one of the effects of trail running is that many of those involved become advocates for the environment. As Tour De Trails director Chris Ord noted in *The Guardian* recently '*Trail running is one of the jigsaw pieces that gets people out to see it, experience it, love it, value it, fight for it.*

how lightly can I tread? how lightly land?

Post-run Asana Sequence 1

I have found the following sequence (Sequence 1) to be useful immediately after running. It is relatively short, uses minimal props, and I have found that it is mostly manageable (or is easily modified) for less experienced students. It rests the areas that have been most exerted and, in my experience, helps both to restore energy and to nullify musculoskeletal imbalance.

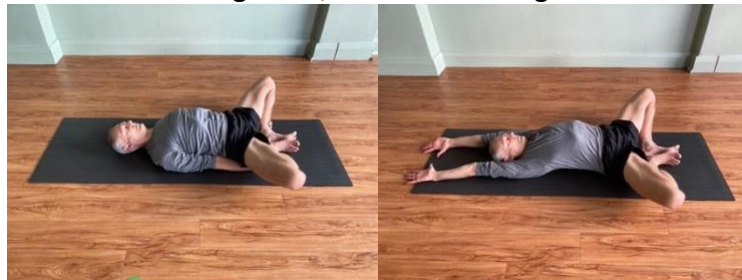
1. Supta Swasikasana with arms by the side, arms horizontal, arms bent overhead:



2. Bhadrasana (1/2 Padmasana – omit if not possible) with arms folded overhead:

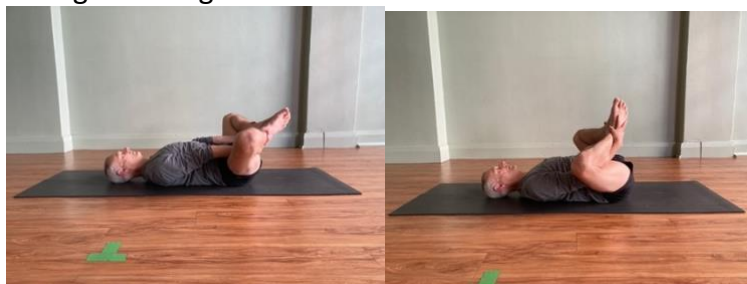


3. Supta Baddha Konasana – holding shins, then arms straight overhead:

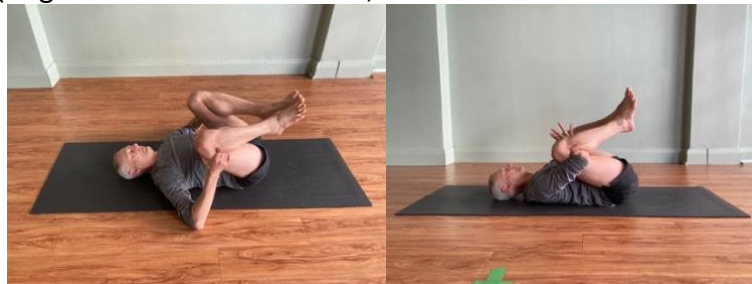


4. Pavanmuktasana variations

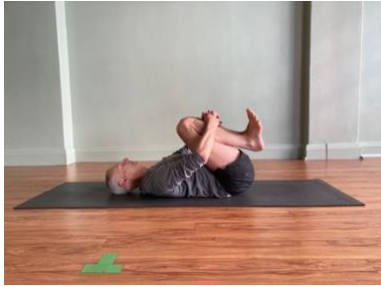
a) Baddha Konasana legs: holding the feet further from and then closer to the trunk:



b) Virasana legs (fingers in outer knee corner, then hands in Namaskar behind legs):



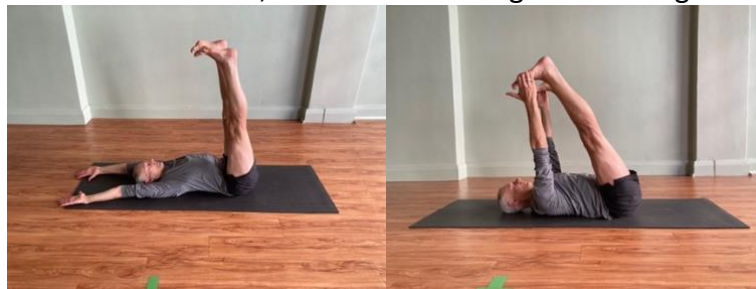
c) Vajrasana legs:



5. Supine 'Garbha Pindasana Variation':



6. Urdhva Prasarita Padotthanasana 1; use belt to hold legs for 2nd stage if needed:



7. Supta Padangusthasana 1; use belt in these variations if needed:



8. Supta Padangusthasana 2:



9. Supta Padangusthasana 3:



10. Savasana:



Post-run Asana Sequence 2:

If time permits (and for a sufficiently experienced practitioner), I have also found the following asanas useful. I tend to leave these variations (which are mainly inversions) for a separate time (either later the same day or on the following day). I have only included photos for what may be unfamiliar variations.

1. Virasana and supported Supta Virasana – the depicted version with chair and block is often accessible to a relatively inexperienced student. Release into Uttanasana.



2. Sirsasana

In Sirsasana: with leg variations, including 'Baddha Virasana' – a hybrid of Baddha Konasana and Virasana and, if possible, Bhadrasana from Parivrrta Parsvaikapada Preparation.



3. Sarvangasana and Halasana cycle

4. Setubhandha on bolsters, legs in Swastikasana or on block(s) with Ekapada, with the bottom leg bent and, if possible, then straight (pictured):



5. Viparita Karani

6. Ardha Halasana

7. Savasana

Śavāsana

It is the plot we all will enter:
The unmarked grave, the silent centre

It is the nought that won't distinguish,
Where all that flares will full extinguish

It is the ground of low and level,
Where No-one can arise to revel:

By it we die before we die —
Still learning how to say *Goodbye*.

~
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© 5/23
V

Arjun von Caemmerer is certificated as a Level 3 Iyengar Yoga teacher and is a medical practitioner, specialized in general practice. He has, with Naomi Cameron, run the Hobart School of Iyengar Yoga, since 1995. He has had roles with IYA as a teacher trainer, assessor, and moderator, and has served on the Teachers' and Ethics Committees. In 2006 Arjun—with the imprimatur of BKS Iyengar—transferred the RIMYI audiocassette version of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra to triple CD. He is the author of *Yoga Coda* (2009), *Essential Yoga The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali* (2014), *Pieces of 8 Versions of Patañjali's Yoga-Sūtra* (4th Ed, 2016), and *Vice Versa new & selected poems* (Collective Effort Press, 2016). His most recent book of poems is *Bible Stories* (2019). The single-line poems in this article are from *Running Writing*, an ongoing series.