

Light has long been a symbol of consciousness and self-illumination. Our primary source of light is, of course, the sun. For thousands of years, the Hindus have revered the sun, which they call Surya, as both the physical and spiritual heart of our world and the creator of all life itself. For the Hindus, the sun is the "eye of the world" that sees an image of and a pathway to the divine. It is said to contain the potentiality of all that is to be known.

The Yoga philosophy tells us that each of us replicates the world at large, embodying "rivers, seas, mountains, fields...stars and planets...the sun and moon" (Shiva Samhita, II.1-3). The outer sun is in reality a token of our own "inner sun," which corresponds to our subtle, or spiritual, heart. Here is the seat of consciousness and higher wisdom (*jnana*) and, in some traditions, the domicile of the embodied Self (*jivatman*), the manifestation of *Brahman* (the Self or *Purusa* in Raja Yoga) in each individual.

One of the means of honoring the sun is through the dynamic asana sequence Surya Namaskar (better known as Sun Salutation). The Sanskrit word *namaskar* stems from *namas*, which means "to bow to" or "to adore." (The familiar phrase we use to close our yoga classes, *namaste—te* means "you"—also comes from this root.) Each Sun Salutation begins and ends with the joined-hands *mudra* (gesture), *Anjali mudra*, touched to the heart. Yogis place the seat of wisdom in the heart, which we typically associate with our emotions, and not the brain. But in yoga, the brain is actually symbolised by the moon, which reflects the sun's light but generates none of its own.

Traditionalists claim that the sequence is at least 2,500 years old, that it originated during Vedic times as a ritual prostration to the dawn, replete with mantras, offerings of flowers and rice, and libations of water. However, many variations have evolved over the years.

The Sivananda tradition recounts 12 "stations" composed of eight different postures, the last four being the same as the first four but performed in reverse order. In this sequence, we start and end in Tadasana. The eight basic postures, in order of performance, are: *Tadasana*, *Urdhva Hastasana*, *Uttanasana*, *Anjaneyasana*, *Phalakasana*, *Chaturanga* or 6 points posture, *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana* or *bhujangasana*, *Adho Mukha Svanasana*; then backward from *Anjaneyasana*. The transition from posture to posture is facilitated by either an inhalation or an exhalation. You will need to repeat the sequence, switching left to right and right to left to complete a full cycle. To start with, it might help to work on the poses individually before we put them together.

We are supposed to launch our practice slowly with three to five rounds, gradually building up to 10 or 15. If this seems like a lot, remember that the traditional number of rounds is 108, which may take more than a few weeks to work up to. The Sivananda tradition recommends 6 cycles or 12 rounds. It is generally performed at the beginning of a session and is seen as a warm up for a full session or before pranayama. You can pace the sequence briskly to generate heat and cleanse the body-mind, or more moderately to create a moving meditation.



In this week session we will practise the Sun Salutation as the main sequence. After relaxation and warm-up, we will progressively build up the sequence to the full salutation; then finish with more static postures. Before the main relaxation, we will practice the Savitri breath (Savitri is Surya's consort, the vivifier), which is a rhythmic breath (traditionally 8-8-8-8; but we will start at 4-4-4-4). As this is the end of the Spring Term, we will end the session with a Yoga Nidra or Yogic sleep.