

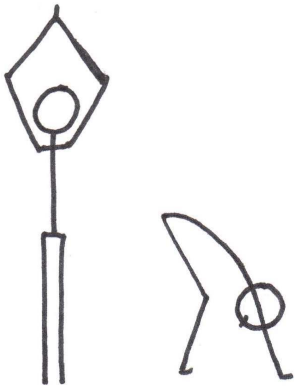
Ode to the Hamstring

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The hamstring, you ask? Admittedly, this is a strange name for a most impressive small family of muscles that make walking, sitting, standing, and a host of asanas not only possible, but elegant, challenging, and, relaxing. The semimembranosus, the semitendinosus, and the biceps femoris, both deep and superficial: these muscles work with both the hip joint and the knee joint to make walking, running, bending, stretching and relaxing the lower part of the body possible. Some of the difficulty one has in bending or stretching may stem from these unsung heroes when they are overly tight, holding and guarding movement – were they to let go, or be absent, the elegance of the mountain pose of the ease of the forward fold would have no stability nor grace, no reign or restraint on their power.



For this brief essay, we begin with *Tadasana*, the mountain pose. “Nothing lasting can be built on a shaky foundation” and *Tadasana* is indeed a foundation. In aligning one’s body, steadying one’s head through shoulders, through hips and slightly tilted forward pelvis, sturdy but not locked knees and strong base of feet – all as if hung from a plumb line from the heavens. The hamstrings take their place, speaking their power and slowly relaxing into quiet strength, an indistinct and essential part of the whole. For the sensitive yoga practitioner, isolating, tightening and loosening the hamstrings in *Tadasana* is possible – much as an orchestra conductor bids the clarinet to speak its part more forcefully, then fade back into unity with the rest of the instruments.

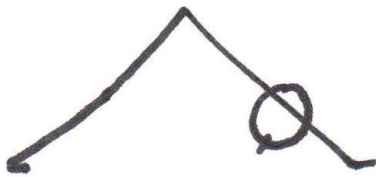


Slowly as the dawn arises, the arms leave their home along the ribcage slowly arching skyward, reaching up and meeting in a slightly curved stretch, hands clasped and pointing well beyond the stratosphere into infinite space. As slowly as they moved up, stretching all the way, they move down, arching fully and stretching out and forward, the hands breaking their contact and moving as far toward the feet as the hamstrings will allow. Awakening by the forward folding motion, mindful of their part in the symphony, the hamstrings provide stability and security holding the gliding torso as the weight of the limbs and core shifts from upward to downward. The arms and hands can go no further than the hamstrings allow; although, as a loving parent, slow and full breathing brings relaxation and slight gains in length with exhalation.



The hamstrings, doing due diligence, are attentive as the rest of the body relaxes into the forward fold; at the ready, the right leg steps back while the left leg forms a sturdy base assisted by the arms and wrists and hands for the core while the right leg finds its base. Once solid, the right and left legs share the load, the hamstrings differentiated by the extensor of the hip joint in the right leg and hamstring, and the flexor of the knee joint in the left leg and hamstring. Separate, but equal, in the fullness of the asana when the spine gently curved along the plum line, shoulders relaxed downward and slightly back; all stand at attention with the neck and head an example of complete focus held upright, eyes straight into the future, perfectly present.

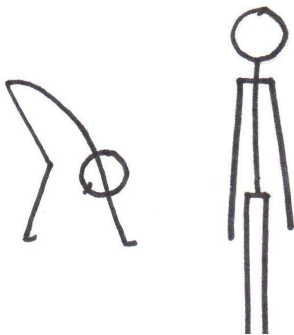
Getting ready to shift, the right leg, with strong hamstrings, arms, locked wrists and sturdy palms and foundational phalanges bear the weight as the left leg joins the right and the torso lengthens into a plank position. As the heels stretch backward with exhalation, the hamstrings strengthen the pose, becoming taut in supporting the straightening spine. Easing the body to the ground, the hamstrings lighten briefly, made ready for *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana* where their supporting role to the anterior thigh muscles (superficial: Sartorius, rectus femoris, vastus medialis ; deep: pectineus, adductor brevis, adductor longus, adductor magnus, gracilis, and obturator externus) carry the body's weight and are important as silent partners.



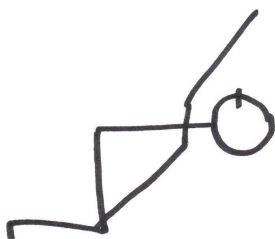
From downward sloop to upward slanting *Adho Mukha Svanasana*, the hamstrings quiet strength is called upon for stability. Tight hamstrings here compromise the hip flexors (iliacus, rectus femoris, pectineus) that activate to assist with the hip flexion (Kaminoff, 2007, pp 176, 177). As the weight is lightly transferred from side to side as the legs bend to enable the opposite heel to move toward the ground, the hamstrings strengthen and loosen in turn, again moving in opposite directions.



In preparation for the completion of this round of Sun Salutations, the left leg prepares to work with the arms, wrists, and hands to carry the weight as upon exhalation, the right leg moves to meet the hands. Easing into the strong support function for stretching the left leg, heels toward the back, stretch in the groin muscles, strength in the right angled right leg, arms and hands, the left hamstring lengthens while the right again plays the support role for the starring anterior thigh muscles.



Preparing to join the right supporting leg, upon exhalation, the left leg loosens and sweeps up to join its mate that works to balance the body, and in turn becomes part of the balance that is the body. Slowly straightening the legs the hamstrings work with the anterior muscles to support the spine as a slow unfurling spine comes to life as it supports the alignment of the body in *Tadasana*.



After a series of three Sun Salutations, the body finds grace in repose gently relaxing head to feet; arms slightly extended from the rib cage the body forming an alliance with the ground. A few relaxing breaths, followed by extended arms and solid core as base for the hamstrings to work in concert assisting the legs and knees in slow twists, to the rights and left respectively, taking two full breaths on each side, then relaxing back into the full body, all limbs lining the earth as the breath becomes the focus of attention. Now is the time for monks breathing* followed by the child's pose, *Balasana*, enabling the



body, and the hamstrings, to fold into primal relaxation, where the body feels complete and whole, sacred. This can be the first or last part of *Savasana*. I like to end in a seated posture, with a few poems and acknowledgement to the nature that surrounds us, and end with peace to the earth, peace to the heavens, and peace in every heart.



***Monks breathing:** Sitting or lying down, take three deep relaxing breaths. Slowly inhale through the right nostril observing the air enter as a white or effervescent light, making its way from the head and sinuses down through the body to below the navel and slowly exhaling through the left nostril all that is no longer needed, all that is waste. Repeat two times for a total of three breaths through the right nostril, exhaling through the left nostril. Repeat this on the left side, inhaling through the left nostril and exhaling through the right. Then, inhale through both nostrils, again observing the breath in and out for three breaths. Continue breathing at a natural pace with your eyes closed as long as you wish. When ready, slowly open your eyelids and greet the day renewed ready for the concluding parts – seated - of morning practice.

Sources used

Kaminoff, Leslie (2007). *Yoga anatomy*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Kapit, Wynn and Lawrence Elson (2002) *The anatomy coloring book*. New York: Benjamin Cummings.

Class Notes.

My own practice.