

The Heroes, Saints, and Sages Behind Yoga Pose Names

From the monkey to the warrior, learn the myths behind the asana names to infuse your practice with history.

BY COLLEEN MORTON BUSCH



As a train hurtles down a track severed by an earthquake, our hero lays his body across the gap and saves the passengers from certain death. When the woman he loves is buried in her car, he spins the earth to turn back time and come to her rescue. He is Superman, transformed from his nerdy alter ego, Clark Kent, into a handsome and outrageously capable superbeing—endowed with extraordinary strength and godlike powers, called upon to protect truth and innocence, and, of course, committed to triumphing over evil.

When we're children, our imagination is held captive by such larger-than-life figures. As we grow older, however, mythic stories often lose their pull on us. We become so rooted in the mundane and prosaic that our connection with archetypal figures like brave heroes and clever princesses often fades. Thankfully, yoga practice invites us back into a realm of feeling and imagination, a realm where superhuman figures can come alive. Hidden behind the tongue-twisting names of many of the asanas we practice are stories of wild and woolly Indian superheroes able to change shape, read minds, and leap vast distances in a single bound.

If we'd grown up in India, these heroes, saints, and sages might be as familiar to us as Superman. But most Western yoga practitioners weren't raised on tales from Indian classics like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas. For us, learning about these legendary heroes can provide new insights into the deeper dimensions of yoga, a practice that is ultimately concerned with much more than assuming the forms of the asanas. As Kausthub Desikachar, grandson of revered Indian yoga master T.K.V. Krishnamacharya, puts it: "By meditating on these characters, we hope that we might come to embody some of their attributes."

Virabhadra



The next time your thighs are turning to Jell-O in Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II)—or anytime life demands a great deal of you—you might want to invoke the spirit of the great warrior for whom this pose is named.

A son of Lord Shiva (the Destroyer, considered the most powerful god of the Hindu pantheon), Virabhadra was born of unbearable suffering. After Shiva's wife Sati was killed, Shiva tore out his hair in grief; from his locks, Virabhadra and the fierce goddess Kali were born. Shiva then made them commanders of the legions he sent to avenge Sati's death. But, according to Rama Jyoti Vernon, president of the American Yoga College, Virabhadra and Kali aren't simply bloody warriors. Like Shiva, they destroy to save: Their real enemy is the ego. "By cutting off the head of the ego," Vernon says, "Virabhadra and Kali help remind us to humble ourselves."

When we practice one of the three versions of Virabhadrasana, Vernon notes, we cultivate the mind of the warrior, who must go into battle unattached to the fruits of his actions—one who has 360-degree vision and can see all things. "You look to all sides in the poses, but you try to hold to your center and not be pulled every which way," she says. "Virabhadrasana teaches us to go into the field of life and stay in the center of our being." If you can imagine yourself as a fearless warrior sent on a divine mission, you just might find renewed strength and vigor in the poses as well as the courage and determination to face life's challenging moments.

Vasistha & Vishvamitra



It's not difficult to see the connection between the poses Vasisthasana and Vishvamitrasana and the attributes of the legendary sages—one a priest, the other a king—for whom the asanas are named.

Both poses are advanced arm balances, but Vasisthasana (Side [Plank](#)) is particularly *sattvic*, or "pure"—it has a buoyant, mind-clearing quality—while Vishvamitrasana is distinctly driven and *rajasic*, or "fiery." The latter is an intense pose that requires a dramatic hip opening and a firm sense of purpose.

The *sattvic* and *rajasic* qualities are embodied in the two sages, who engaged in a long battle with each other over a magical, wish-fulfilling [cow](#) named Nandini. As in many ancient Indian tales, the very human motives evident in this story—competition and greed—sit atop layers of spiritual symbolism.

Here we find the dynamic tension in spiritual life between effortless grace and determined practice. Vasistha embodies the grace that comes with spiritual attainment and contentment: A divine son of the god Brahma and a member of the priestly caste at the top of the Indian social hierarchy, Vasistha seemed destined by birthright for high spiritual achievement—and goodies like his magic cow.

Vishvamitra wasn't quite so blessed. Even though he was a king, a member of the Kshatriya warrior caste that was second only to the priestly Brahmins, he didn't have Vasistha's earthly or spiritual advantages. "Having been born a Kshatriya," says Kofi Busia, a senior [Iyengar Yoga](#) teacher who studied Sanskrit and Indian mythology at Oxford, "Vishvamitra had little initial hope for the highest achievements in the spiritual realm."

But like most Indian sages, Vishvamitra was strong-willed. First, he tried to seize Nandini by force. No matter how he tried, this approach failed. As the conflict continued, both sages demonstrated the spiritual achievements for which they're still renowned. Vasistha displayed his

tolerance and mastery of the emotions; even though Vishvamitra and his warriors are said to have slain a hundred of Vasistha's sons, the Brahmin remained calm and was never vengeful.

During the course of the battle, the king Vishvamitra eventually came to desire not just a wish-fulfilling cow but spiritual strength. He set out to become a Brahmin and, after many penances and austerities, succeeded. In fact, says Aadil Palkhivala, student of B.K.S. Iyengar since the age of seven and a YJ editorial adviser, "when Vishvamitra transformed himself and became a man of God, even Vasistha came to pay homage to him. This is why Vishvamitra's pose is more difficult than Vasistha's: His sadhana [spiritual practice] was more difficult."

Astavakra



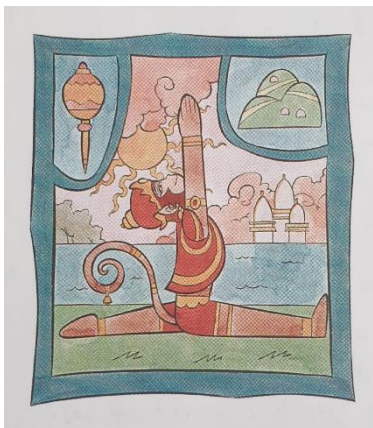
Fathers have never much liked being outsmarted by their offspring. In most cultures, any evidence of a son's arrogance can get the son into deep trouble with his father. Astavakra's tale contains classic elements of the intergenerational tensions that show up even—or perhaps especially—in the realm of religion and spiritual practice.

What makes Astavakra remarkable is that he crossed the line with his father, and was punished, before he even left the womb. While still in his mother's belly, he corrected his father's recitation of verses from the Rig Veda, a collection of India's oldest and most sacred hymns. Enraged, Astavakra's father cursed him, and the boy was born deformed. Astavakra's name refers to the eight (*asta*) crooked (*vakra*) angles of his limbs; the many angles of the pose Astavakrasana evoke the curse of crooked limbs that Astavakra triumphed over by dint of his persistence, piety, and intelligence.

Despite his father's cruel curse, Astavakra remained a faithful son. When the boy was 12, his father lost a priestly debate and was banished to the watery realm of Varuna, lord of death. Although the journey required a monumental effort, Astavakra traveled to the king's court to challenge the man who had bested his father. Because of Astavakra's unsightly shape, the people at court laughed at him—but only until he opened his mouth and they discovered he was incredibly learned and deeply insightful, even though he was still just a boy. Astavakra triumphed in the debate, winning his father's freedom, and people who once mocked him became his disciples, including the king.

Astavakra's story illustrates the human tendency to judge things by their appearance rather than by their true substance. It is also a reminder of the power of steadfast faith to triumph over ridicule and misunderstanding. According to yoga teacher Aadil Palkhivala, "Astavakrasana appears to be very difficult, but actually, it's one of the easiest of arm balances if you just know the technique. What the pose is trying to tell us is that even when things seem extremely convoluted, if you just know how to arrange them, your situation is not as arduous as it looks." While some poses are designed to make us work hard, others, like Astavakrasana, are actually designed to teach us to work less. "This asana requires more knowledge than effort," Palkhivala says. "It is not a fighting pose; the primary feeling in it is a sense of freedom."

Hanuman



The monkey god, Hanuman, is revered throughout India. As the Ramayana recounts, he demonstrated his devotion to King Rama by searching the world for Rama's beloved wife Sita, who had been kidnapped. So great was Hanuman's desire to serve his master that he performed a mighty leap across the ocean to find her.

The pose named for Hanuman—sitting on the floor in a full front-to-back split—is a challenging one. Open hamstrings, quadriceps, and [psoas](#) muscles help a student progress in the pose, but it's the qualities embodied by Hanuman that serve us most—not only in the pose but also beyond it: purity of motive, the conviction to unite what has been made separate, and the zeal to rise to any challenge.

According to Aadil Palkhivala, Hanuman stands for the ability to fly—thanks to the intensity of our devotion—whereas before, we could only walk. "Hanumanasana reminds us that we can free ourselves of our small stride, our narrowness, our petty circumstances," he says.

Goraksha & Matsyendra



Just as Plato and his protégé Aristotle are celebrated as wellsprings of Western philosophy, teacher Matsyendra and his student Goraksha are revered as founders of hatha yoga.

It's fitting that Matsyendrasana (Lord of the Fishes Pose) is a spinal twist. "Twisting poses symbolize revolving the front body, or what is conscious, to the back body, the subconscious," American Yoga College's Rama Jyoti Vernon says. "They bring light into darkness and the dark to light, a process essential to yoga."

It's easy to imagine the first hatha yogis discovering these physical forms as they experimented with purifying the body to liberate the mind.

Matsyendra appears to have been an actual historical person, not just a figure of myth. Born in Bengal around the 10th century c.e., he is venerated by Buddhists in Nepal as an incarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara. As with most Indian myths, there are many versions of the story of Matsyendra's metamorphosis into a realized adept—and all of them illustrate the radical transformation that yoga makes possible.

In one popular version, the infant Matsyendra is thrown into the ocean because his birth has occurred under inauspicious planets. Swallowed by a giant fish, he overhears Shiva teaching the mysteries of yoga to his consort Parvati in their secret lair at the bottom of the ocean. Matsyendra is spellbound. After spending 12 years in the fish's belly, all the while exploring yoga's esoteric practices, he emerges as an enlightened master.

Matsyendrasana is one of the few asanas described in the [Hatha Yoga Pradipika](#), a 14th-century text, and the deep twist is familiar to most Western yoga practitioners today. Fewer Western yogis are likely to practice Gorakshasana, a difficult balance in which the practitioner stands on his knees in Lotus Pose. But in yogic lore, Goraksha is often considered the more influential of the two adepts.

Matsyendra's chief disciple, Goraksha reputedly came from a low caste but at a young age devoted his life to renunciation and teaching. The story of his birth exemplifies his humble beginnings and may explain his devotion to his teacher. According to legend, Goraksha's mother—a peasant woman—prayed to Shiva for a son, and the god gave her magical ashes to eat that would enable her to become pregnant. She failed to understand the boon, however, and threw the ashes on a dung heap. Twelve years later, Matsyendra heard of the promised child and visited the woman. When she confessed she'd thrown the ashes away, Matsyendra insisted she revisit the dung heap—and there was 12-year-old Goraksha.

Goraksha came to be known as a miracle-working yogi who used his magical powers to benefit his guru. At one point, he assumed a female form to enter a king's harem and rescue Matsyendra after the teacher had fallen in love with a queen and gotten sidetracked from his spiritual life.

Goraksha's name means "cow protector" and may just refer to his humble beginnings. But in India, the light of consciousness is thought to be embodied in cows—even those that can't magically fulfill wishes. As with Matsyendra, "Goraksha" may not be simply a name but rather a title honoring the yogi's spiritual attainments.

"Metaphorically, Goraksha's story says that when something in life doesn't look like what we want, we often cast it aside. But in the most discarded thing can be hidden the greatest blessing," Vernon says. And, as with the tale of Matsyendra, Goraksha's life story underscores our potential to awaken despite all sorts of obstacles.

Creation of the world

Before time began there was no heaven, no earth and no space between. A vast dark ocean washed upon the shores of nothingness and licked the edges of night. A giant cobra floated on the waters. The mighty serpent watched over the Lord Vishnu, who lay asleep within its endless coils. Everything was so peaceful and silent that Vishnu slept undisturbed by dreams or movement.

From the depths a humming sound began to tremble. The first word was created: Om. It grew and spread, filling the emptiness and throbbing with energy. The night had ended. Vishnu awoke. As the dawn began to break, from Vishnu's navel grew a magnificent lotus flower. In the middle of the blossom sat Vishnu's servant, a God with four faces, named Brahma. He awaited the Lord's command. Vishnu spoke to his servant: 'It is time to begin.' Brahma bowed, and Vishnu commanded: 'Create the world.' A wind swept up the waters. Vishnu and the cobra vanished. Brahma remained in the lotus flower, floating and tossing on the sea. He lifted up his arms and calmed the wind and the ocean. Then Brahma split the lotus flower into three. He stretched one part into the heavens. He made another part into the earth. With the third part of the flower he created the skies.

The earth was bare. Brahma set to work creating grass, flowers, trees and plants of all kinds. To these he gave feeling. Next he created the animals and the insects to live on the land. He made birds to fly in the air and many fish to swim in the sea. To all these creatures, he gave the senses of touch and smell. He gave them power to see, hear and move. The world was soon bristling with life and the air was filled with the sounds of Brahma's creation.

Brahma

Brahma is the first god in the Hindu triumvirate. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. Within the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, Lord Brahma is the Creator, Lord Vishnu the Preserver, and Lord Shiva the Destroyer. Lord Brahma, the Creator God of the Trinity appears seated on a lotus (a symbol of glorious existence). He has four heads and hands. In each hand he holds a sacrificial tool, the Vedas (knowledge), a water pot and a rosary or mala respectively. Unlike most other Hindu Gods, none of his arms holds a weapon. The four faces of Brahma are said to represent the four Vedas (sacred texts). The lotus symbolizes reality, and his heads also represent four ways we perceive that reality, namely: the mind, the intellect, the ego and conditioned-consciousness.



A story in connection with Brahma's four heads is that when Brahma was creating the universe, he made a female deity known as Shatarupa with a hundred beautiful forms. Brahma became immediately infatuated. Shatarupa moved in various directions to avoid the gaze of Brahma, but wherever she went, Brahma developed a head. Thus, Brahma developed five heads, one on each side and one above the others.

In order to control Brahma, Shiva cut off the top head. Also, Shiva felt that Shatarupa was Brahma's daughter, having been created by him. Therefore, Shiva determined, it was wrong for Brahma to become obsessed with her. He directed that there be no proper worship in India for the "unholy" Brahma.

Thus, only Vishnu and Shiva continue to be worshipped, while Brahma is almost totally ignored. Ever since the incident, Brahma has been reciting the four Vedas in his attempt at repentance.

His consort is Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. The daily alteration of light and dark is attributed to Brahma.

Lord Brahma is invoked for to help us surrender the ego and better serve humanity. He can be invoked for creative inspiration and flashes of new thoughts to discover the secrets of nature. You can invoke Lord Brahma to bring good energy to whatever you choose to create.

Saraswati



Saraswati is one of the few important goddesses in the Veda's. In the Veda's her character and attributes are clearly associated with the mighty Saraswati river. She is extremely beautiful, youthful and gracious. She holds a Lute, a rosary, a book and a water pot. The book associates her with the sciences and with learning in general. The lute associates her with the arts, particularly the musical arts, and the rosary and the water pot associate her with the spiritual sciences and with religious rites. Like Lakshmi and unlike Durga and Kali, she does not carry any arms of weapons.

Legends say she sprung from the forehead of her father, Brahma. As soon as Brahma looked at this beautiful woman, he desired her, even though she was his daughter. Saraswati disliked the amorous attentions of this old god and kept dodging him, but whichever way she moved, Brahma grew a head in that direction to see her better. As a result, he grew four faces on four sides of his neck, and even a head on top of these four, so that she could not escape by moving upwards. But Saraswati still eluded him.

In the end she becomes his wife. Saraswati, thus, though married, never enjoyed domestic bliss like Durga or Lakshmi. According to most myths she had no children, possessed a fiery temper, was easily provoked and was somewhat quarrelsome. She, of all the goddesses, is described as possessing a very independent will and was not very obliging to the male gods.

Vishnu



Vishnu is the second god in the Hindu triumvirate that consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are Brahma and Shiva.

Brahma is the creator of the universe and Shiva is the destroyer. Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe.

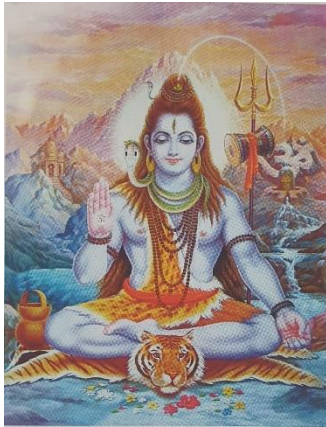
Vishnu means 'spreading in or pervading all directions'. He is the core in all that exists as well as the force which keeps everything tied. He is said to pervade everything just as an infinite ocean. Since water is also known by the word 'nara', his name is also Narayana.

His role is to return to the earth in troubled times and restore the balance of good and evil. So far, he has been incarnated nine times, but Hindus believe that he will be reincarnated one last time close to the end of this world.

Vishnu is represented with a human body, often with blue coloured skin and with four arms. His hands always carry four objects in them, representing the things he is responsible for. The objects symbolise many more meanings than are presented here:

- The conch: the sound this produces 'Om', represents the primeval sound of creation
- The chakra, or discus: symbolises the mind
- The lotus flower: an example of glorious existence and liberation
- The mace: represents mental and physical strength

Shiva



Shiva is the third god in the Hindu triumvirate. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are Brahma and Vishnu.

Brahma is the creator of the universe while Vishnu is the preserver of it. Shiva's role is to destroy the universe in order to re-create it.

Hindus believe his powers of destruction and recreation are used even now to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change. According to Hindu belief, this destruction is not arbitrary, but constructive. Shiva is therefore seen as the source of both good and evil and is regarded as the one who combines many contradictory elements.

Shiva is a complex god, in terms of nature and represents contradictory qualities, being the destroyer and the restorer simultaneously. There are numerous legends surrounding lord Shiva and his powers.

Shiva is known to have untamed passion, which leads him to extremes in behaviour. Sometimes he is an ascetic, abstaining from all worldly pleasures. At others he is a hedonist.

It is Shiva's relationship with his wife, Parvati which brings him balance. Their union allows him to be an ascetic and a lover, but within the bounds of marriage.

Parvati



After the death of Shiva's first love Sati, Shiva isolated himself into a dark cave, buried amongst the snow covered peaks of the Himalayas. He rejected the world outside so distraught was he by the loss of his first true love. Meanwhile the demons lead by Taraka, rose from the underworld and drove the devas, gods out of the heavens. The gods sought a warrior who would help them regain the celestial realm.

Only Shiva can father such a warrior", informed Brahma. But Shiva, immersed in meditation, was oblivious to the problems of the gods. As he performed tapas, meditations that produce great heat and energy, his mind was filled with great knowledge and his body became resplendent with energy. But all this knowledge and energy, bottled within his being, was of no use to anyone. The gods invoked the mother-goddess, who appeared before them as Kundalini, a coiled serpent.

"I will coil myself around shiva, wean out his knowledge and energy for the good of the world and make him father a child", said Shakti. Shakti took birth as Parvati, daughter of the Himavan, lord of the Mountains, determined to draw Shiva out of his cave and make him her consort.

Every day Parvati would visit Shiva's cave, sweep the floor, decorate it with flowers and offer him fruits hoping to win his love. But shiva never opened his eyes to look upon her charming face. Exasperated, the goddess invoked Priti and Rati, goddess of love and longing, to rouse Shiva out of his meditation. These goddesses entered Shiva's desolate cave and transformed it into a pleasure garden filled with the fragrance of flowers and the buzzing of bees.

Guided by Priti and Rati, Kama, the lord of desire, raised his sugarcane bow and shot arrows dripping with desire into the heart of Shiva. Shiva was not amused. He opened his third eye and released the flames of fury that engulfed Kama and reduced his beautiful body to ashes. The death of Kama alarmed the Gods. "Without the lord of desire man will not embrace woman and life will cease to be"!.

I shall find another way to conquer Shiva's heart. When Shiva becomes my consort, Kama will be reborn, said the daughter of the mountain, Parvati. She went into the forest and performed rigorous tapas, wearing nothing to protect her tender body from the harsh weather, eating nothing, not even a leaf, earning the admiration of forest ascetics who named her Aparna.

Aparna matched Shiva in her capacity to cut herself from the world and completely master her physical needs. The power of her tapas shook Shiva out of his meditation. He stepped out of his cave and accepted Parvati as his wife. Shiva married Parvati in the presence of the gods following the sacred rites and took her to the highest peak of the cosmos, Mount Kailash, the pivot of the universe. As the world revolved all around them the two became one and Kama was reborn.

Ganesh/Ganesha



Lord Ganesh is the virtual son of lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The story of Ganesh is a very fascinating one.

Lord Shiva was on a long fight for the gods and Parvati was home alone, sick and tired that she was disturbed in her baths by everyone wanting to enter. She created a son, Ganesh. Ganesh was instructed to keep strict vigil on the entrance to the house and not to allow anyone into the house.

When Lord Shiva returned happy after a glorious victory for the gods, only to be stopped at the entrance by Ganesha. Ganesha, not knowing Shiva by then, did not allow Shiva to enter the house. Lord Shiva was enraged beyond control and in fit of rage slashed the head of Ganesh. In the meantime Parvati came out from her bath and was aghast at the scene. She was very (very) angry at Shiva for what happened and she explained the situation to him and who Ganesh was.

Shiva wanted to make it up to Parvati very badly and promised to bring life back into Ganesh by putting the head of the first sleeping living creature that came in sight. The first creature he came across was an old wise elephant, who lived long enough and offered his head for the life of Ganesha.

Parvati was still not too happy that her beautiful son turned into an elephant headed man, and Shiva granted Ganesha an boon that before beginning of any undertaking or tasks, people would worship lord Ganesha. He is known as the remover or bringer of obstacles.