

Take Flight



Take a new approach to Bakasana and get yourself airborne with ease.

VINYASA FLOW teacher Natasha Rizopolous counts Bakasana (Crane Pose) as one of her favorites. “I love

arm balances, because they bring you to that place of one-pointed focus that is yoga,” she says. But when she first encountered the pose, her naturally flexible frame struggled to find the stability to balance. As a teacher, she often notices the opposite, but equally frustrating, problem for strong, stiff students—they have the strength to muscle into the pose but lack the openness to complete the desired shape, which leaves their bottoms sticking up high in the air. Fortunately, Rizopolous has found a way to overcome both of these challenges—she encourages students to let go of the result and focus on the actions that make up the pose. “Once you master the actions, the pose will unfold naturally,” she says.

In the sequence that follows, beginning on page 68, Rizopolous teaches a dual action for Bakasana. First, draw your belly up and round your entire spine. From there, extend your breastbone away from your navel. Balancing these two actions will help you achieve Bakasana—without butt-in-the-air syndrome.

before you begin

Sit in a simple cross-legged position with your torso and arms extended forward and a block beneath your forehead. Establish steady Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath). Stay for a minute or two, and then switch the cross of your legs. Fold forward again, sending your breath to your hips to help them warm up and open. Turn your attention inward by focusing on your breath and the point of contact between the block and your forehead.

Take two or three rounds each of Surya Namaskar A and B. Follow this with Vira-

bhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II), holding for 10 to 12 breaths on each side; then come into Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog).

after you finish

After Bakasana, take Pada Hastasana (Foot-to-Hand Pose) to release your wrists, then Balasana (Child’s Pose) to quiet your mind. Finish with a calming pose like Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose) or Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose), and then a gentle twist before Savasana (Corpse Pose).

home practice

take flight

sequence by *Natasha Rizopolous*

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1 Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose)

Stand with your legs wide apart—right foot turned out, left foot turned slightly in—and your right leg bent at a 90-degree angle. Place a block behind your right foot and press down on it firmly with your whole hand. Reach your left arm toward the ceiling. Broaden across your collarbones and shoulder blades equally, releasing your shoulders away from your ears. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths, and then come to Downward Dog and switch sides.

2 Plank Pose

From Downward Dog, come into Plank Pose with your hands shoulder-width apart and your wrist creases parallel to the front of your mat. Press your heels back and extend the breastbone forward. Firm the tops of your thighs as you release your tailbone toward your heels. Feel how the belly engages and supports your lower back.

3 Vasisthasana (Side Plank Pose)

From Plank Pose, roll onto the outer edge of your right foot and take your left arm toward the ceiling, stacking it directly above your right arm and releasing the shoulders away from the ears as you did in Parsvakonasana. Maintain the actions of Plank by firming your thighs and releasing your tailbone toward your heels. Hold for 5 breaths, and then return to Plank and switch sides. Rest in Downward Dog for a few breaths.

4 Plank with Knee to Chin

Come forward to Plank and, keeping your shoulders stacked over your wrists, bring your right knee toward your chin. Press the left heel back, lifting the top of the left thigh as you release your tailbone toward your heels. Notice the dual action: Your lower belly engages, and your back rounds as you extend your breastbone forward. Do each side for 5 breaths. Return to Downward Dog.



5 Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose)

Set up in Plank Pose. Then bend your elbows, extending your breastbone forward and keeping the heads of the shoulders lifted so the essential action of the pose is forward rather than down. Stay for 1 to 3 breaths, then release all the way to the floor.

6 Sphinx Pose

Stay on your belly with your elbows on the floor and your forearms parallel to each other. Keep your feet hip-width apart and release your tailbone toward your heels to lengthen the lower back. Draw your breastbone forward and keep your shoulder blades wide as you bring heat and energy into your upper back. Hold for 5 to 8 breaths.

7 Cat-Cow Combination

Combine Cat and Cow Poses to find the dual action for Bakasana. Set up in a tabletop position with your hands and knees closer to each other than usual. Come into Cat Pose by rounding your spine and directing your tailbone down as you lift and spread your shoulder blades. Without losing the breadth across the upper back, extend your breastbone forward as you would in Cow Pose. Hold for 5 to 8 breaths and then come into Downward Dog.

8 Garudasana (Eagle Pose)

Step or hop into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), inhale to come up, and exhale into Tadasana (Mountain

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Pose). Come into Garudasana, with the left leg and right arm on top. Find a steady gazing point and then drop your tailbone as you lift your elbows up and away from your chest. Broaden across your shoulder blades and extend your sternum away from your navel. Hold for 5 breaths on both sides. Then stand in Tadasana for a few breaths.

9 Malasana (Garland Pose), variation

From Tadasana, bend your knees and come into a squat with your feet hip-width apart and your toes turned slightly out, knees aligned with your second toes. Place a blanket beneath your heels if they don't reach the floor. Release your tailbone down. Reach your sternum up and away from your navel as you spread across your collarbones so that your outer upper arms and knees press against each other. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths.

10 Bakasana (Crane Pose)

Begin in a squat, high on your toes, with the inner edges of your feet together, and place your hands on the floor, shoulder-width apart. Bend your elbows and hug your outer upper arms with your knees. Find a steady gazing point about a foot in front of your hands on the floor, and then shift your weight and reach your breastbone forward with so much energy that your feet float up toward your buttocks. Inflate between your shoulder blades as you release your tailbone toward your heels, and continue extending your breastbone forward. Hold for 5 breaths.



 cut out and save!