

# Hand Helping Hand

Partnering up in yoga class can deepen your practice and connect you to yourself and your fellow yogis.

**We were only** a few minutes into the yoga class when the teacher uttered the five words I dread hearing: “OK, everybody, find a partner!” As we students sized up one another with varying degrees of wariness, the teacher demonstrated what she wanted us to do by leaping lightly onto the thighs of a supine volunteer and balancing there, as gracefully as a cat, her feet grounding and rotating her partner’s thighs inward.

Full disclosure: My approach to partnering exercises in yoga class has generally been of the “Lie back and think of England” variety, though I usually participate as gamely as I can. But this particular caper was just too much for my inner Woody Allen. What if my partner or I slipped and fell? What if I had bone density issues I didn’t know about? What if my partner outweighed me, or I her? What about my bad knee? *Where* were the feet supposed to go? Concerned about my safety, and uncomfortable turning to the person next to me and saying, “It’s nice to meet you. I’m now going to place my bare feet on your thighs,” I declined to participate.

Unlike “partner yoga,” in which two people come together to create a single pose, often practiced with a friend or significant other, “partnering” takes place when your teacher asks you to consider the student

next to you as a human prop to help you get into a pose more fully, isolate a particular action, or help you balance. A teaching tool in many styles of yoga classes, partnering tends to inspire strong feelings among practitioners: Mention the subject to a group of yoga students, and the room is likely to erupt in exclamations as people tell their stories of awkward moments, contact with another person’s sweat or stinky feet, and even injuries.

Here at the Yoga Journal office, where we practice yoga together every day, we ask that our teachers not do partnering exercises in class — not all of us are comfortable with the degree of physical intimacy involved in sharing sweat with a supervisor, or gripping a co-worker from behind. But the frequency of partnering exercises in the other classes I attended made me wonder whether my resistance to them could be holding me back. What was I missing by participating reluctantly, →

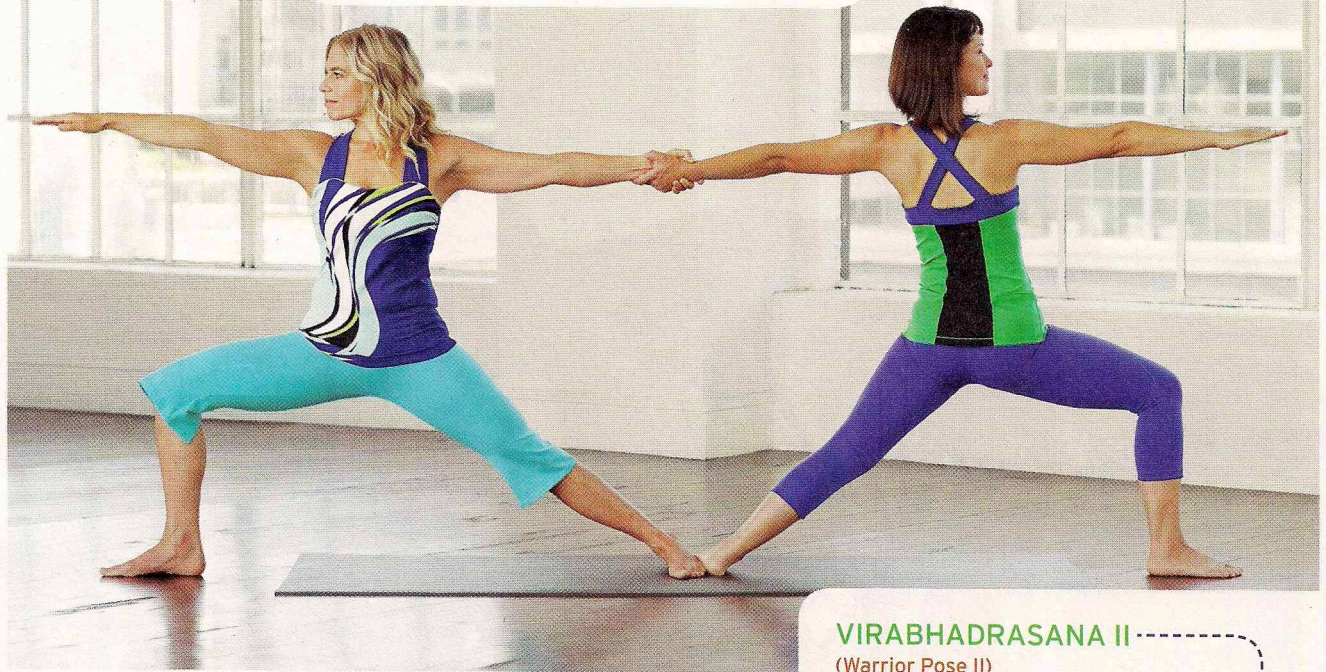
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## THE POWER OF TWO

Working with a partner is a fun way to realize some basic actions more deeply and to experience the poses in a new way. These instructions refer to the person doing the pose as the "receiving partner" and the person assisting as the "helping partner."



### VIRABHADRASANA II

(Warrior Pose II)

A common tendency in this pose is to lean one's weight too far forward, toward the front leg. Working with a partner whose size is similar to yours can help you feel where the torso should be placed, how much weight should be in the back leg, and what the action of the arms should feel like.

As partners, come into the pose left shoulder to left shoulder—next to each other, but facing opposite directions—so that each partner's left foot is the back foot in the pose. Place the outer edges (little-toe sides) of your back feet against each other. Push your back foot against your partner's to help lift your inner arch and keep your back leg active and straight. Grasp each other's forearms and pull gently, helping each other lengthen the back arm. Hold the pose for 30 seconds to a minute. To come out, push into your back foot a little more as you straighten your front leg. Repeat on the other side.

asana instruction by  
Leslie Howard

or opting out entirely? When I started asking around, I discovered that there's no simple answer to that question, since partnering exercises themselves, and people's attitudes toward them, vary greatly. A few teachers told me that they never teach partnering exercises in class, because of the risk of injury. For other teachers and practitioners, asking, "How do you feel about partnering?" was like asking, "How do you feel about yoga?"—so central does the one practice seem to be to the other. Still others described partnering, when done safely and skillfully, as a useful tool for deepening your practice.

#### SO WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

But let's face it: Depending on the exercise, partnering in class can be embarrassing. I think of my yoga teachers the way I think of my doctor or physical therapist, and I've never felt uncomfortable with a teacher's adjustments. But I can't say the same when a fellow student is fumbling for my hip points or squeezing my inner thighs. "If someone's in a supported Paschimottasana, and the other person's hands are on their back, just giving feedback, that's fine," says Cyndi Lee, *Yoga Journal's* Basics columnist and the founder of OM Yoga in New York, who says she doesn't teach much partnering, especially in beginners' classes—in part, because of the embarrassment factor. "But your yoga classmate is not your doctor. There's not that same natural boundary." In addition to the discomfort of sharing my personal space, it's embarrassing to put my hands or feet on a stranger's body, to wonder where their feet have been, or when my own last pedicure was. Most of all, it's embarrassing to admit how embarrassing these inconsequential corporeal details can be. I practice yoga so that I can further my development as →



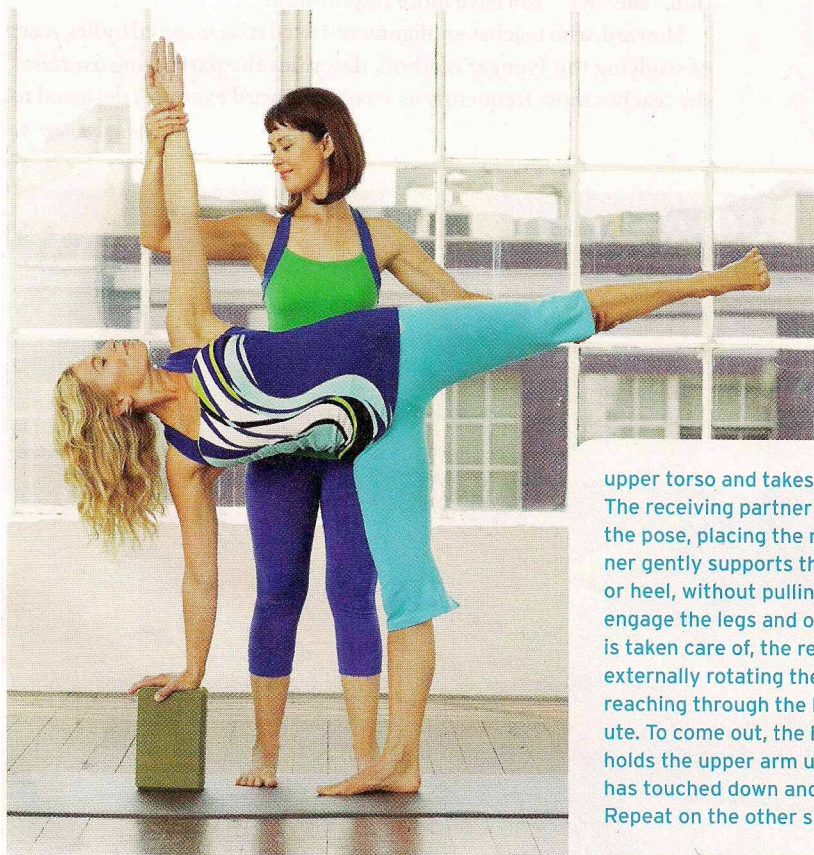
## ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA

(Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

Working with a partner in this pose can enhance the action of the legs and reinforce the drawing-back action of the hips. This partner exercise also puts the spine into traction and takes the weight of the pose out of the shoulders.

The receiving partner comes into Downward-Facing Dog. The helping partner stands a few inches behind, then places a strap around the front of the tops of the receiving partner's thighs, close to the hip crease, grasping the strap as close as possible to the receiving partner's legs. (If it feels more secure, wrap the strap around your hands.)

As the helping partner, bend your knees slightly, keeping your torso upright with a natural curve in your lower back, and start to pull strongly on the strap, drawing your partner's hips back. The receiver should feel an increased stretch in the hamstrings and calves, and space in the lower back, and might find that the heels get closer to the floor. Check in about the amount of pressure, and adjust accordingly. Hold for a minute. Slowly let go and see if the receiver can maintain some of the drawing-back action in the hips and legs.



## ARDHA CHANDRASANA

(Half Moon Pose)

The most difficult part of Ardha Chandrasana is balancing, and unless you can balance, it can be difficult to feel the other actions of the pose. Working with a partner to help you balance allows you to focus on opening the front of the body. Choose a partner who is of similar height.

The receiving partner takes Trikonasana (Triangle Pose) on the right side. The helping partner stands behind the receiving partner's upper torso and takes hold of the left wrist or upper arm. The receiving partner steps off the back leg and comes into the pose, placing the right hand on a block. The helping partner gently supports the underside of the partner's calf, ankle, or heel, without pulling up. The receiving partner should engage the legs and open the front chest. Once the balance is taken care of, the receiving partner can work on lifting and externally rotating the quadriceps of the standing leg and reaching through the left heel. Hold for 30 seconds to a minute. To come out, the helping partner releases the leg but holds the upper arm until the receiving partner's back foot has touched down and the weight is supported on both feet. Repeat on the other side, and then switch positions.



## SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA

(Bridge Pose)

When you work with a partner in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, you might find you can lift your chest a little bit more. The receiving partner places a strap across the width of the mat and lies down so that the strap touches the upper back. The helping partner sits a few inches from the top of the receiving partner's head, takes hold of the ends of the strap, and places the feet against the tops of the receiving partner's shoulders.

The receiving partner comes into the pose. The strap should now be in the crease of the armpits, and the ends should be parallel to the floor. If you are the helping partner, press gently down through your feet to keep your partner's upper arm bones down. Lift your own chest (be careful not to round your back) and pull the ends of the strap toward you, not up toward the ceiling.

If you are the receiving partner, make sure you are drawing the buttock flesh away from the lower back as the chest is opening, being mindful of any sensation of compression in the lower back. Keep your weight on the ball of your big toe and keep your knees aligned with your hip sockets.

The helping partner pulls for 20 to 30 seconds and then slowly releases the strap. Notice if the receiving partner can maintain the new height of the chest. After a few breaths, the receiving partner slowly releases to the floor, lengthening the lower back. Switch positions.

a fully realized human being...so why am I thinking about toenails? But perhaps the biggest reason students and teachers avoid partnering exercises in class, particularly with beginning students, is a concern for safety. "I have a friend who was injured doing partner exercises. I've had that fear: This is a student, not a trained teacher—do they know how to support me?" says Sarah Saffian, a writer and yoga student in Brooklyn. Another downside to partnering, for some, is that it interrupts the flow of the class. "Sometimes, in the context of an hour-and-a-half class, partner work doesn't seem to provide enough benefit compared with the amount of time it takes to explain and to take turns helping one another," says Michele King, a yoga student in San Francisco. Not only does partnering interrupt the physical practice, it can also interrupt the deep concentration you drop into during class. "I go to yoga for an internal experience, and partnering exercises are disruptive of that," Saffian says. "They take me out of my little world on that mat."

### A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

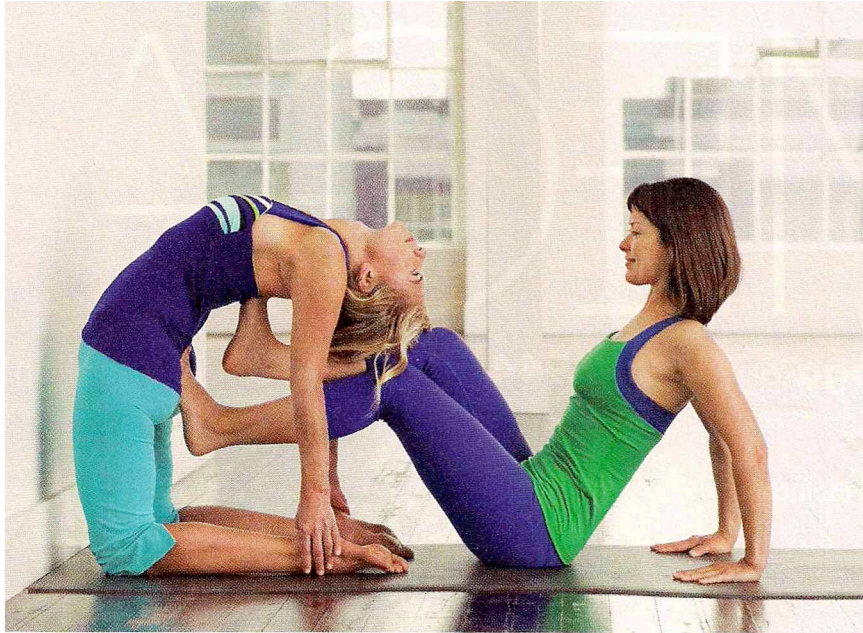
In the right context—that is, when partnering is done skillfully and safely—working with a fellow student can have myriad benefits, including changing the tempo of the class. While some students might object to having their attention redirected from their own practice to another student's, some teachers say that's one of the benefits of partner exercises. When the energy in the room is low, one way that Stacey Rosenberg, a certified Anusara Yoga teacher in San Francisco, likes to raise the energy level is to do a partner pose. Leslie Howard, a yoga teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area, puts it another way: "You can zone out when you're doing your own practice, but when you know you're going to have to do something with another student, you really pay attention," she says. "You have more responsibility."

Howard, who teaches an alignment-based style inspired by her years of studying the Iyengar method, describes the partnering exercises she teaches most frequently as straightforward exercises designed to

*continued on page 94*







## USTRASANA (Camel Pose)

A partner's support in Ustrasana can help you keep your chest lifted and keep compression out of your lower back, two actions that can be challenging in this pose. Choose a partner of similar weight.

The receiving partner kneels on a mat facing a wall. If you are the helping partner, sit on the mat directly behind the receiving partner, close enough that you can place your feet on your partner's back body without straightening your legs. Lean back slightly and support your weight on your hands or forearms. Place the ball of one foot on the top of the receiver's buttock flesh, at the top of the sacrum, and gently draw the flesh of the buttock down to help the receiver keep the lower back long in the pose. Check in

about the placement of your foot, making sure it is at the top of the buttock, not in the lumbar region (lower spine).

This pose is traditionally done with the top of the feet on the floor, but it can also be done with the toes tucked under to make the feet more accessible. The receiving partner lifts the chest and comes into the pose, bringing hands to feet without collapsing the chest, and minimizing how much the pelvis falls back, away from the wall. Once the receiving partner has placed the hands, the helping partner can place the ball of their second foot between the receiver's shoulder blades and gently push up to help the chest lift. You should think of your two feet drawing away from each other, up toward the ceiling and down toward the floor, not toward the wall. Hold for 30 seconds.

To come out, the helper can remove the foot from the receiving partner's buttock, but leave the foot between the shoulder blades in place until the receiver is upright. Support and encourage your partner to keep the chest lifted coming out of the pose.

## SUPTA PADANGUSTHASANA

(Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation

In Supta Padangusthasana, the outer thigh of the top leg tends to lift, causing the lumbar spine on the side of the lifted leg to shorten. This simple exercise, done with a partner and a block, can help you understand the connection between the legs and the lower back, and reinforce the idea that the thighbone should move toward the back of the leg.

The receiving partner uses a strap to bring the right leg up to 90 degrees. If you are the helping partner, sit or kneel on the outside of your partner's right leg, so that you can easily place a block on the back of your partner's thigh, touching the sitting bone. Hold the block in place, but don't push.

The receiving partner should push into the block with both the sitting bone and the thigh, noticing that, as the right side of the waist gets longer, the hamstring gets a deeper stretch. The helping partner should be able to feel the pushing. Repeat on the left side, and then switch positions. Notice if your partner pushes more strongly on one side or the other, and offer feedback.

