

ways of the Warrior

There are many ways to cultivate quiet strength in Virabhadrasana I. Here, teachers of five yoga styles reveal the nuances of Warrior Pose I.

BY HILLARI DOWDLE

Here's a story every yogi should know: Once upon a time there was a powerful king named Daksha. When his daughter—who went by the name Uma or Sati or just plain Shakti—fell in love with and married the lord of universal consciousness, Shiva, let's just say Daksha wasn't exactly thrilled.

To make his feelings about his loathed son-in-law clear, Daksha threw a party and invited everyone *but* Shiva.

Whereas Shiva could have cared less about the social snub—being the lord of consciousness and all, he was able to rise above it—Sati was incensed. So angry was she that she burst into flames (or threw herself into a fire, depending on which ancient text you read) and died.

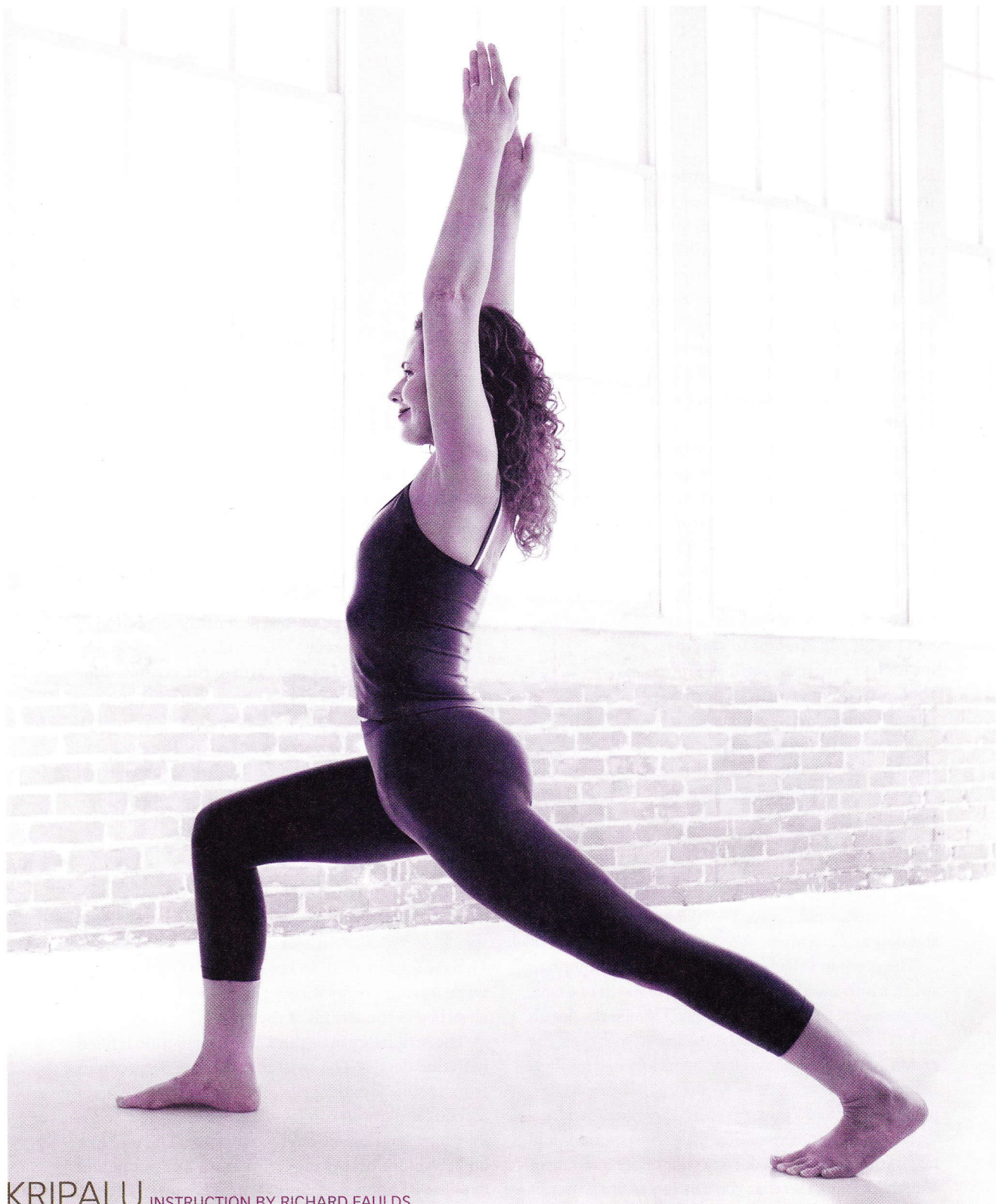
Devastated, Shiva threw one of his dreadlocks down to the earth to create the warrior demon Virabhadra.

At Shiva's direction, Virabhadra violently stormed Daksha's party, cut off the king's head, and trampled on Indra, the god of war. The scene was total havoc.

For anyone who's ever sweated and groaned their way through Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose I), it may come as no surprise that the asana was inspired by cosmic chaos, death, and destruction. Many yogis, especially

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KRIPALU INSTRUCTION BY RICHARD FAULDS

STAND IN TADASANA (Mountain Pose). With your hands on your hips, exhale and take a big step forward with the right foot, keeping the feet hip-width apart. The left heel is off the mat. Bend the right knee, letting the hips sink

toward the floor. Keep the right knee directly over the ankle (slide the left foot back, if necessary, to create a strong base posture). Square the hips to the front of the mat, moving the left hipbone forward and the right hipbone

back. Press back through the lifted left heel to engage the leg muscles and straighten the leg. Inhale and sweep the arms out to the sides and overhead, shoulder-width apart and palms facing in. Let the hips sink toward the floor

as you lift the sternum, extending through the crown and pressing the fingertips toward the ceiling. Gaze straight ahead. (*Learn more about the Kripalu Warrior Pose on page 117.*)

beginners, feel genuinely embattled by its complexity: its persistent tug-of-war between extension and compression, twist and backbend, internal and external rotation, and strength and flexibility.

In other ways, though, the story of Virabhadrasana is utterly ironic. “Given that the ideal of yoga is *ahimsa*, or ‘nonharming,’ isn’t it strange that we would practice a pose celebrating a warrior who killed a bunch of people?” asks Richard Rosen, a contributing editor to *Yoga Journal* and the director of Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California.

To answer that question, you have to take a look at the pose’s metaphorical meaning—as is nearly always the case when considering Indian mythical lore. “The yogi is really a warrior against his own ignorance,” Rosen says. “I speculate that Virabhadrasana I is about rising up out of your own limitations.”

Tim Miller, director of San Diego’s Ashtanga Yoga Center, agrees. “Virabhadrasana’s a humbling posture,” he says. “If you attempt to stay in it for any length of time, you’ll confront your own bodily, emotional, or mental weaknesses. Whatever limitations you have, the pose will reveal them so that they can be addressed.”

When viewed this way, practicing Warrior I can be seen as fighting the good fight. According to Rosen, the pose’s form is the physical representation of the monster Virabhadra ascending from the ground at Shiva’s feet, righteous and strong. Take the posture with understanding and intention, and you are just that.

The pose, in other words, is about the triumph of spirit, a universal theme in yoga. Like much of asana, the pose comes in many variations. Though the details differ from style to style and yoga class to yoga class, the energy remains the same. Here, five celebrated teachers from different traditions (Anusara, Ashtanga, Kripalu, Iyengar, and Viniyoga—with apologies for others we had to leave out) share their own instructions and inspiration to help you deepen your understanding of Virabhadrasana I so that you can access the power of the warrior within you.

“The yogi is really a warrior against his own ignorance,” Rosen says.

Iyengar >>

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

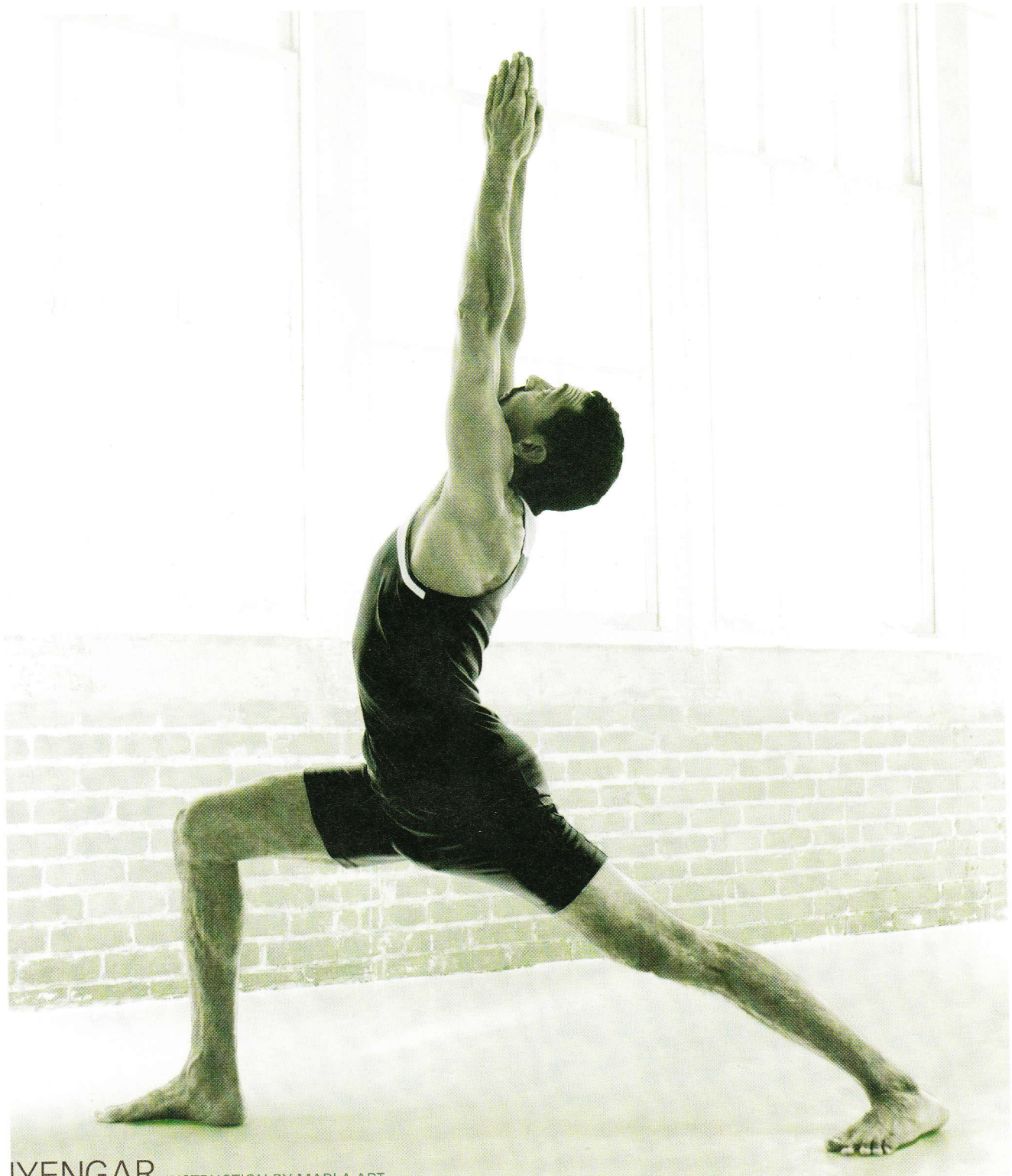
Although the story of Virabhadra may be an ancient one, the asana is mostly a modern invention. “Virabhadrasana I is not a posture that’s found in the classical asana texts,” Rosen notes. “It’s not clear where it came from, but it was probably thought up by T. Krishnamacharya about 70 years ago. It’s a 20th-century pose—you can think of it as part of the evolution of asana.” You can also credit the popularity and form of the posture done today to Krishnamacharya’s student (and brother-in-law), B. K. S. Iyengar, whose conception of the pose and its detailed alignment is considered by some to be the gold standard in American yoga.

To practice the pose the Iyengar way means finding the proper balance between inspiration and execution. “You can watch Iyengar do the pose, and though it’s fierce, it’s also completely harmonious,” says Marla Apt, a certified teacher at the B. K. S. Iyengar Yoga Institute in Los Angeles. “That’s what we want: warrior energy without aggression. Our mind is absorbed in the actions of the pose.”

The actions are many, and Apt’s instruction is filled with fine details. The twist in the upper body comes from the back middle ribs, she says. The back body ascends and moves toward the front body. The abdomen lifts, but the buttocks move down. The tailbone and shoulder blades move forward, but not at the expense of lumbar compression. The outer edge of the back foot pushes into the floor. The arms are like swords, very sharp, Apt says. The head looks up as if making a triumphant offering to the gods.

Moreover, the pose is the gateway to backbends.

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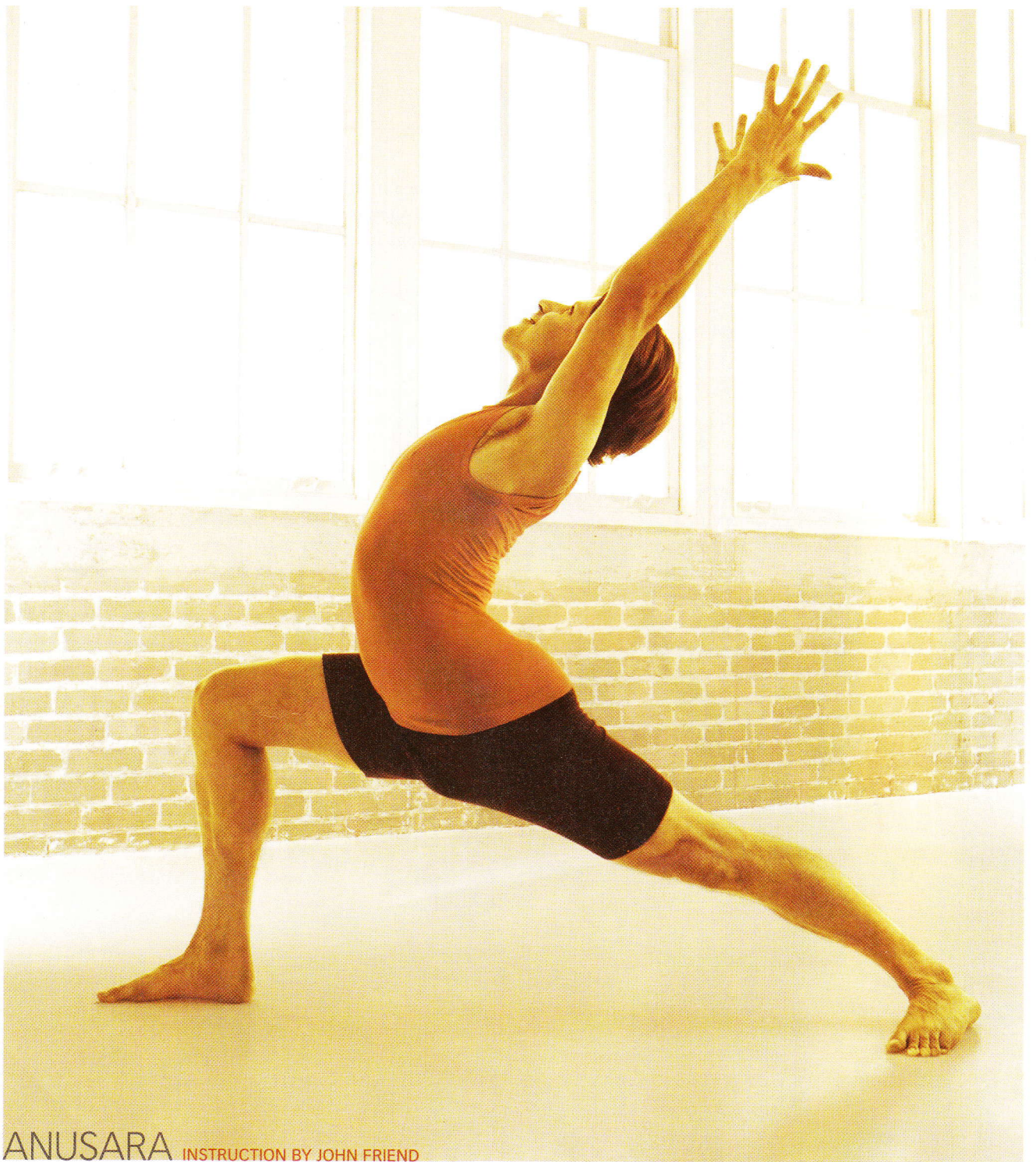
IYENGAR INSTRUCTION BY MARLA APT

FROM TADASANA (Mountain Pose), jump the legs wide apart and extend the arms to the side to make a T so that the feet land directly under the hands. Turn the upper arms out, palms up, and raise the hands overhead. Lift the sides of the torso toward the fingers while moving the shoulder

blades forward to support the lift of the chest. If you can keep the arms straight, join the palms together. Turn the right foot out 90 degrees; turn the left foot and leg strongly inward. Exhale, and turn the hips and torso to face the right leg. Bend the right knee to a 90-degree angle, keeping the

knee aligned directly over the ankle. Press the back edge of the left heel into the floor and straighten the left leg. Internally rotate the left leg so that the outer thigh rolls forward as you bring the right thigh parallel to the floor. Let the top of the right thighbone descend as you lift the

front of the pelvis and abdomen up toward the chest. From the left back ribs, turn the left side of the torso forward. Lift through the sides of the rib cage, the armpits, and the sternum as you look up toward the ceiling.



ANUSARA INSTRUCTION BY JOHN FRIEND

WITH WARRIOR POWER, place the feet 4 to 5 feet apart. Stretch your arms to the sides. Pause to fill your inner body with courageous brightness. Lift your chest, turn your right (front) foot out 90 degrees, and swivel on your back heel to point the toes slightly inward. Heels are aligned. With the left leg rooted, turn the hips toward the front of the mat. With

Muscular Energy, draw both legs in toward the midline, and plug the arm bones into the shoulder sockets as you lift the arms to the sky. Draw the shoulder blades down the back and curl them in toward the heart, creating space between the shoulder blades and the waistline. Lift victoriously through the chest. Bend your right leg to a 90-degree angle,

knee aligned over the ankle. Spiral the left thigh in and draw the outer right hip back and down. Counterbalance by spiraling the right thigh slightly outward. Widen your hips with an Inner Spiral, and then scoop your tailbone with an Outer Spiral. Imagine an orb of luminous power where the sacrum meets the tailbone. This is the source of your

Organic Energy—from here, root down and extend up triumphantly toward the top of the head as you curl your throat slightly back (but don't tuck your chin). Keeping a natural curve in the neck, lengthen and look up, remembering the Divine source of the warrior power. (*Learn more about the Anusara Warrior Pose on page 118.*)

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will emerge from the inside out," explains Richard Faulds, a senior yoga teacher at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and the author of *Kripalu Yoga: A Guide to Practice On and Off the Mat*. "That's what happened to Swami Kripalu. At age 38, his evolutionary kundalini energy awoke, and his body spontaneously performed all of these postures."

The pose that Swami Kripalu ushered into the world does differ in one key detail: The back heel stays off the ground. Not that the physical specifics are the most important thing. "We see postures as tools to open and awaken presence in the body," Faulds says. "The question we always ask in Kripalu Yoga is: What does the posture bring forth in you?"

The answer, of course, is individual and personal. But, in general, Warrior I invites a sense of empowerment. "The posture makes you simultaneously strong and open hearted, even vulnerable," Faulds explains. "That's something a lot of us are not so good at. We think to be strong means to be a tough ass and that to be open hearted means to be all soft and blubbery. Kripalu Yoga is really about this balance of 'will' and 'surrender.' You need will to bring your energy and mental power to bear on the world. But you also need to be able to surrender enough to see the opportunities in life naturally."

The pose is terrific for exploring these emotions and any others that might come up, Faulds says—particularly difficult ones, the kind that can hold you back from life's full expression. "The strength you tap into in Warrior I can also bring up anger, frustration, and hostility," he notes. "In the pose, we can let those energies build—we can let ourselves feel them fully. We learn to ride the waves of emotion and sensation, so that the pose becomes a safe space for our feelings to play out."

some guys in the park doing lunges with their arms up, and they were just building their butts. When you are doing Virabhadrasana I, you *are* building the butt and legs, but you're also expressing your spirit through your body in a triumphant way. I want students to have the context so that the pose is coming from the inside out," he says.

Friend points to five main actions in the pose—each of which corresponds to one of Anusara Yoga's five Universal Principles of Alignment. "The first of these is *Opening to Grace*—you have to remember the Universal," he says. "Virabhadra is strong only because he comes from God. Remembering this, the inner body grows lustrous, and the outer body can simply drape down onto this inner light."

Once you're in the posture, the next principle is *Muscular Energy*. "You are always hugging in toward the middle—squeezing into the source of your power," he says. This translates into a scissoring action in the legs.

Third, *Inner Spiral*: "The back leg turns inward so that the thighbone moves back and the hips widen," Friend says. "This will allow the back hip to turn more readily to the front." And the fourth principle, *Outer Spiral*: "The Outer Spiral is emphasized on the front thigh to bring the legs closer together and draw the tailbone forward," he says. "It balances the effects of the Inner Spiral."

Finally, *Organic Energy*. "Create a Focal Point in the core of the pelvis—picture a small orb of light at the area where the tailbone meets the sacrum," Friend instructs. "From that place, everything extends out and shines like the sun."

The key to the pose is the first principle, Friend says. "When you brighten up on the inside and relax on the outside, you don't have to work so hard," he concludes. "The pose should be a full expression of one's intention, which might be to honor the universal creative power—the Shakti. After all, Virabhadra was avenging a girl. When you think about it that way, it's really a celebration of the goddess." ■

Hillari Dowdle, a former Yoga Journal editor, writes in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Anusara

GODDESS POWERED

In Anusara Yoga, the pose is inseparable from the legend that inspired it; tease the two apart, and it's simply not yoga, says Anusara founder John Friend. "I saw



ASHTANGA INSTRUCTION BY TIM MILLER

START IN Adho Mukha Svana-sana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). At the end of the exhalation, step the right leg forward and plant it 4 feet directly in front of the left foot, with the heels aligned. The right foot points forward; the left foot is angled 30 degrees inward. Bend the right knee so that the thigh is parallel to the floor and the knee aligned

over the ankle. Keep the outer edge of the back foot pressing into the floor. Inhale slowly as you extend the spine upward from the coccyx, bringing the body upright and lifting the arms to the sides and overhead. Move the left hip forward and the right hip backward and square the torso to the front. Engage the pelvic floor and lift the pubic bone

toward the navel to engage the *bandhas* (energy locks). Inhale as you sweep the arms to the sides and overhead. Press the palms together and look up, directing your gaze steadily at your thumbs (this visual focus is called *drishti*). Allow the mind to become quiet. With each breath, come into the pose more deeply by gradually increasing the bend of the right

leg to align the knee with the tips of the toes. Exhale as you pivot the body 180 degrees, and then immediately move into the pose on the other side. (*To learn more about the Ashtanga Warrior Pose, see page 80.*)

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“Practitioners can learn within the laboratory of the pose all the actions necessary to avoid compression in their lower backs in backbending,” Apt says. “Virabhadrasana I allows us to work toward moving the tailbone forward and lifting the torso out of the lower body—taking the head back safely, moving the shoulder blades forward toward the chest, and extending strongly through the arms.” These are the very actions needed, she notes, to execute more-advanced backbends, such as UrdhvaDhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose), as well as inversions, twists, and forward bends.

There is no single point of physical focus in the pose. “The two sides of the body—left and right—are doing totally different things,” Apt says. “It’s quite sophisticated and a good representation of Iyengar Yoga. We never focus on just one thing; we spread our consciousness everywhere.”

<< Ashtanga

GO WITH THE FLOW

Warrior I is perhaps the defining pose in Ashtanga Yoga’s B-series Sun Salutation, or Surya Namaskar B. “In Ashtanga, we usually run through Virabhadrasana I several times as we repeat each side in Surya Namaskar B. And as the body gets warmed up, you can go more deeply into the pose,” Tim Miller explains. “It all happens quickly, so you are not spending a lot of time considering the biomechanics of the pose. It’s more about doing it in the flow.”

The flow is what Ashtanga is all about. “The benefit is that it gets you out of your head,” Miller says. “It’s a more right-brained approach. It’s not about trying to figure everything out—there is no one right way. Which is not to say that you want to do the pose sloppily.”

Most of the fine points of the Ashtanga pose are familiar: front leg bent 90 degrees, back leg straight and outer foot pressed down, hips square to the front, arms overhead. But there’s one key difference: In Ashtanga Yoga, as taught by K. Pattabhi Jois, another student of T. Krishnamacharya’s, the front knee extends beyond

“There is no one right way. Which is not to say that you want to do the pose sloppily.”

the ankle, in line with the tips of the toes. This is the ultimate goal for the pose, but it may not be safe or accessible for every student, Miller points out. Practiced this way, the pose has a benefit that transcends the physical, according to Miller. “By going deeper into the front leg, you get more into the area around the sacrum and are able to access the *granthis*,” he says.

Miller explains that *granthis* are energetic knots that block the flow of prana in the body. You can think of them as places where you feel “tangled up.” There are three types of *granthis*: Brahma *granthi*, the physical knot headquartered in the sacrum; Vishnu *granthi*, the emotional knot centered in the heart; and Shiva *granthi*, the mental knot associated with the third eye. Practiced the Ashtanga way, Virabhadrasana I addresses all three simultaneously, helping the practitioner unsnarl tangles in the body, mind, and spirit. “The physical nature of the pose addresses Brahma *granthi*, the focus on the breath addresses the emotional knot in the chest, and the idea of *drishti* [focal point] addresses the mental knot by focusing the mind,” Miller says. “It’s a whole package that works on an energetic level.”

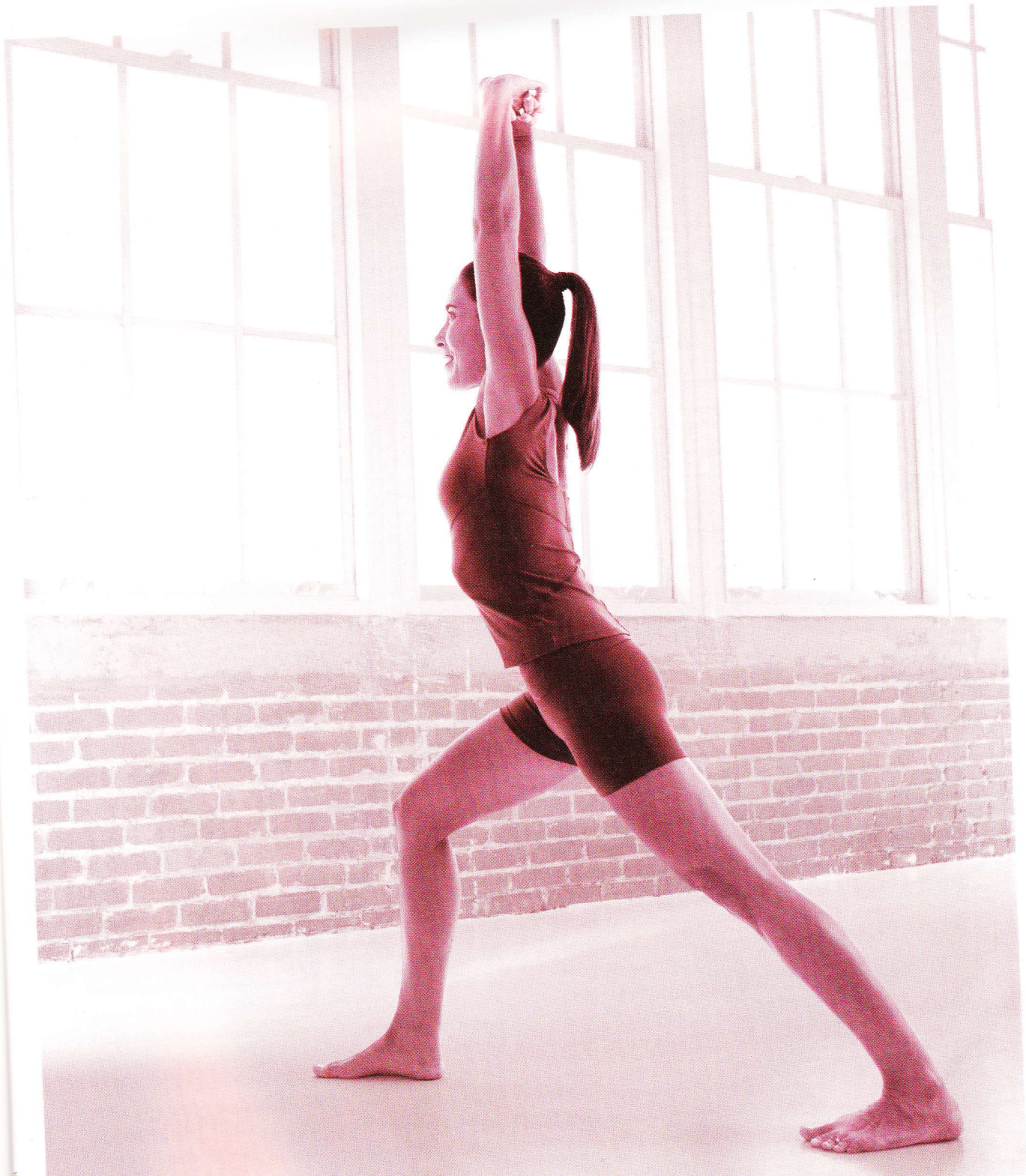
Viniyoga >>

AN ASANA FOR EVERY BODY

Gary Kraftsow, founder of the American Viniyoga Institute, considers Warrior I a greatest-hits asana. “If there are 10 or 15 postures that are core for all human beings, this is one of them,” he says. “It strengthens the legs and back, realigns the spine, stretches the psoas, opens the hips, creates stability in the hip joints, and deepens respiration. It can be seen as a symbol of increasing self-confidence and courage. If you have a sense of its meaning, it will reinforce those qualities.”

Kraftsow learned the pose from his teacher, T. K. V. Desikachar, who in turn learned it from his father, Krishnamacharya. In the Viniyoga tradition, asana is often used therapeutically and taught one-on-one, so

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VINIYOGA INSTRUCTION BY GARY KRAFTSOW

STAND IN TADASANA (Mountain Pose) at the back of the mat. Step the right foot forward to create a stance that's long but allows you to easily shift your weight forward and back. Feet are hip-width apart. Inhale as you simultaneously bend the right

knee, draw the shoulders back, and lift the arms forward and overhead, fingers interlocked and palms facing upward. Keep the upper arms in line with the ears. Move the chest slightly forward, displacing it in front of the hips to bring the arch into the upper

back. Lift the sternum away from the navel. Keeping the weight firmly and evenly pressing through both feet, gaze forward with the chin level. Exhale, lower the arms, straighten the right leg, and return to the starting point. On the next inhalation, bend the

leg and reenter the pose, retaining the breath for 2 seconds. Continue to move in and out of the pose with the breath 5 more times. Release the pose, and repeat it on the other side.

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the teacher will vary the pose depending on the individual. "There is no correct or incorrect way of doing Virabhadrasana I—in fact, there are as many variations on the pose as there are people practicing it," Kraftsow notes. "The pose can be done in different ways to achieve different functional potentials in the body—one might be more appropriate in one context than in another."

Variations include the width and length of the stance, the arm and head positions, the depth of the bend in the front knee, the relative rotation of the back leg, and the relationship between the hips and shoulders. "If you have a wide stance with the front thigh parallel to the floor, it can help build strength in the legs," he explains. "If you make the stance shorter, keep the arms parallel to the floor, and pull the shoulder blades toward each other, it helps to flatten thoracic kyphosis [an excessive curve in the upper back]. If you rest the same-side arm on the front leg and displace the chest forward and up, raising the other arm, it can help you access and stretch the iliopsoas muscles." And these are just three among the nearly endless physical variations.

Kraftsow explains that these modern adaptations of Warrior I are based on an ancient Indian martial arts stance. "In a martial situation, you'd be able to advance or retreat without using excess energy," he says. "The pose should be long but allow you to step forward or back easily. The center of gravity is low, so you're stable and grounded on your feet. The chest is open in a symbol of courage, and you gaze directly forward across the battlefield."

Kripalu

STRONG AND SOFT

Of all the schools in American yoga, three of the major ones—Bikram, Kundalini, and Kripalu—do *not* flow from Krishnamacharya. Though it shares its name and mythology with other traditions, the Kripalu Warrior was received by divine inspiration during Swami Kripalu's practice in the 1950s. "Our tradition holds that you meditate deeply enough, hatha yoga

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