

- *by* Jason Crandell

With a little fine-tuning, you can sail through your Sun Salutations with grace and ease.



**Watch:** A full video of this Sun Salutation sequence [here](#).

When Sun Salutations feel good, they feel very, very good. The fluid, rhythmic postures awaken the whole body, focus the mind, and enliven the breath. But the same continuous, dynamic movement that makes this sequence (traditionally called Surya Namaskar) so exhilarating is also what makes it difficult to home in on its individual parts and refine them. And so there is likely one part or another that doesn't feel so good to you. Perhaps you consistently stub your toe as you step forward to a lunge, or you feel pain in your lower back when you jump back into Plank Pose. Maybe your breath feels uneven or rushed during certain parts of the sequence, or you're confused by how to make the deep breathing sounds that everyone around you is making.

These little trouble spots are more than just annoying—they prevent you from getting the full range of benefits from Sun Salutations. So, it's a good idea to pay attention to them and either work on refinements or learn modifications that best suit your body. When you take the time to do this, your breath will deepen, your body will get stronger, and you'll have a better overall experience of this essential series of poses.

This guide looks at some of the most common problems that crop up in Sun Salutations and offers step-by-step solutions to help you refine the poses and make the transitions work for your body. With a little time and attention, you'll be able to flow smoothly and safely through your next vinyasa class with even greater lightness and ease.

### **Trouble Spot: Lifting Halfway Up**

It's a small movement, lifting up from [Uttanasana](#) (Standing Forward Bend) into [Ardha Uttanasana](#) (Half Standing Forward Bend). Because it's tiny, you might skim over it, barely lifting your spine. But if you give this transitional pose short shrift, you'll skimp on your breath and potentially strain your neck. You'll also miss the main benefits: strengthening and decompressing the spine.

### **The Tune-Up**



The key to skillfully executing Ardha Uttanasana is to lift the front of your chest high enough to engage your paraspinal muscles, the long muscles that extend your spine. This usually means that you're lifting your shoulders as high as (or slightly higher than) your hips. If you have incredibly flexible hamstrings, you may be able to keep your fingertips on the floor while you lengthen your spine, but most students need to place their hands on their shins.

**How to:** From Uttanasana, place your hands on the middle of your shins (if you are more restricted, place your hands at the top of the shins). Lightly press your hands against your shins, and lift your torso until your shoulders are level with your hips. Press the top of your thighs back, lengthen your spine forward, and broaden your chest. Feel your spinal muscles engage, and complete your inhalation before releasing into Uttanasana.

### **Trouble Spot: Staying Steady in Plank Pose**

When your Plank Pose is unsteady, you can overwork your wrists and overload your lower back. A tweak in your alignment will help you adequately engage your core

and stabilize your shoulder blades so that the effort of Plank Pose is distributed evenly throughout the whole body. When Plank Pose is stable, it comes to life—it feels easier, lighter, and more dynamic.

### The Tune-Up

Plank Pose is usually taught with the arms and shoulders stacked directly over the wrists. While this is one correct way of doing the posture, placing the hands a couple of inches in front of the shoulders makes it easier to engage the muscles on the outer borders of the shoulder blades and to pull your shoulders away from your ears, which keeps your neck long and tension-free. You'll also work your core more intensely.



**How to:** Come into Plank Pose, with your shoulders above your wrists. Move your feet back another 2 to 3 inches so that your hands are just slightly in front of your shoulders. Root down through the base of your fingers, broaden your shoulder blades, and draw your shoulders away from your ears. Feel how these actions enliven your arms and upper back. To awaken your core, gently draw your front ribs and the bottom of your sternum away from the floor. This subtle action fires the upper fibers of your abdomen. Complement these actions by slightly tucking your tailbone and pulling your hip points away from the tops of your thighs.

### Trouble Spot: Stepping One Foot Between Your Hands

It can be a struggle to get your foot all the way between your hands when you transition from [Adho Mukha Svanasana](#) (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) to a lunge or a Warrior Pose. If you can't get your foot forward far enough, you'll end up in a pose that flexes the knee too deeply, prevents the hip flexors from getting stretched, and makes it more difficult to step the second foot into Uttanasana. By adding just a slight modification to this transition, you'll find a perfectly aligned stride, which will prevent stress on your knee and provide a stretch in your back hip flexor.

### The Tune-Up

If you can't bring your foot between your hands from Downward-Facing Dog, bring



your knees onto the floor for a moment first. This may feel cumbersome, but it will help you align the front foot. With practice, you'll be able to bring your knees down without missing a breath or falling behind.



**How to:** From Down-ward-Facing Dog, take a slow, deep inhalation. As you begin your exhalation, bring both of your knees to the floor so that you are on all

fours. As you finish your exhalation, lean slightly to your left, hold on to your right ankle with your right hand, and use the hand to bring your foot all the way forward. Bring your right fingertips back to the floor next to your right foot. Then inhale, straighten your back knee, and come into your lunge or Warrior Pose.

#### **Trouble Spot: Overefforting as You Jump Forward**

Jumping forward from Downward-Facing Dog to a pristine Standing Forward Bend with your feet perfectly placed between your hands is a beautiful thing. But it's not a necessary thing. Most people can't jump all the way to their hands. (If you can easily press your chest against your legs in a standing or seated forward bend, you're a candidate.) If you try to jump farther forward than your body can accommodate, you put unnecessary tension on your upper back and neck.

#### **The Tune-Up**

If you can smoothly jump between your hands from Downward-Facing Dog, there's no need to stop! But if your jump lands short of your hands, there's no reason to think that something is wrong—or that there's a bigger benefit to landing between the hands. Your landing zone depends on the flexibility of your hamstrings. If your hamstrings are not so accommodating, you need to allow yourself to land shy of your hands, or else you are likely to overwork your shoulders and neck.

**How to:** Bend your knees, and bring your gaze forward in preparation for your transition. Keep your eyes steadily focused on where you want to land. Wait until your



exhalation is nearly complete before you take flight. If you jump during your inhalation or at the beginning of your exhalation, your midsection will be more inflated from breath, which makes it more difficult to travel forward. Jump only as far forward as is reasonable for your body, and let go of the notion

that you have to land in any one particular spot.

### **Trouble Spot: Jumping Back to Chaturanga Dandasana**

The phrase "jumping back" is an apt description of moving from Uttanasana to [Chaturanga Dandasana](#) (Four-Limbed Staff Pose), but when you take these words too literally, it creates problems. If you throw all your body weight back, you'll arrive in Chaturanga with your hands too far forward. This misaligns the upper body, overloads the shoulders, and compresses the lower back.

### **The Tune-Up**

To land in a well-aligned Chaturanga, the force of your legs moving back needs to be balanced by your chest moving forward. This requires not only abdominal strength but also body awareness, which you'll build over time as you practice. Once you're able to master it, the transition will feel lighter, smoother, and more graceful—even though it requires more strength.



**How to:** From Uttanasana, bend your knees, place your palms on the floor, and lean slightly forward. Gaze forward so that your attention is focused on the floor in front of you. Now bend your elbows more deeply, and shoot your chest forward as you jump

back. As you shoot your chest forward and take flight, engage your abdominal muscles, and hug your elbows toward the sides of your ribs as you bend your arms. Be sure to jump on the exhalation so that it's easier to engage your abdominals. It may take a few repetitions to get the hang of it, so try it a few times.

### **Trouble Spot: Not Enough Strength for Chaturanga Dandasana**

Chaturanga's complex alignment makes it one of the most difficult poses in the yoga

canon. If you don't have enough strength, it's difficult to properly align the posture, which can lead to shoulder, wrist, and lower-back injuries. Paradoxically, if you don't have enough strength to do Chaturanga accurately, the posture loses its strength-generating ability.

## The Tune-Up

There are many ways to modify Chaturanga Dandasana. One solution that will help you build strength while staying in the flow is to bring your knees to the floor and take either [Salabhasana](#) (Locust Pose) or [Bhujangasana](#) (Cobra Pose). These short-term alternatives can bring a well-aligned Chaturanga within reach. Salabhasana with palms facing the floor strengthens the external rotators of the arms and the upper back. Bhujangasana strengthens part of the rotator cuff and the shoulders, arms, and chest. These postures are valuable because they are accessible yet demanding. While your neighbors hover in Chaturanga, you can take one of these postures. Alternate between them to build balanced strength.



ribs.

**How to:** For Cobra Pose, place your palms on the floor, with your fingertips in line with the middle of your chest. Press down through your hands, hug your elbows in, and lift your chest. Extend your spine a moderate amount, but be sure to keep your elbows bent and squeezed in toward the sides of your body. Keep your shoulder blades firm against the back of your



**How to:** For Locust Pose, come onto your belly. Stretch your arms back and turn your palms toward the floor. Gently press down through the tops of your feet and pubic bone. (You'll keep your feet on the floor in this version.) Lift your head, chest, shoulders, and arms off the floor as high as you can. Pull your shoulders away from your ears, and feel your upper back and arms engage. Exhale, lower back to the floor, and continue your Sun Salutation.

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[Jason Crandell](#) lives in San Francisco and teaches alignment-based vinyasa yoga workshops around the world.