

Vrksasana – The Tree Pose

Staying stable in an unstable world - by Daryl Vansier

You probably don't remember what it felt like when you first found yourself, a toddler, standing upright on your two wobbly little feet, but if you have ever witnessed a child taking their first steps, you could not help being impressed by their expression of elation.

Emerging from the underworld of crawlers like a periscope through the surface of the sea must feel elevating, and perhaps this rush of power shifts us unto a whole new phase of discovery and connection with the world around us. Learning to stand on our own two feet may mark the beginning of our journey towards independence or self-reliance and life offers us many more opportunities to build on our wobbly beginnings, to strengthen our foundations as we mature.

The instructions we hear during a sequence of standing postures in yoga often contain words like 'grounding', 'rooting', 'centering', or 'balancing' - words that speak just as much about how we experience our bodies in relation to this planet as they do about where our heads are *at*, or how much we are *in* our heads. One of my bodywork teachers used to playfully shout: "left foot" when we were practicing a new technique to remind us to draw our attention from a thinking mode into feeling our connection with our bodies and the body we were touching. In a society where so much emphasis is on achieving, our minds are often busy with mental agendas and strategies for success. *Balance* is a healthy tension between our head and feet, between thinking and feeling, doing and being, and also *centering* between apparently conflicting internal 'voices' or persona. For a lot of us standing balances are particularly challenging because they tend to evoke reactions from parts of ourselves that are often well concealed and stable within their own kingdoms or contexts.

Vrksasana, or Tree Pose is a fascinating example. Let's take a few moments to *do* the asana before we 'space out' on more philosophy. Standing with both feet joined together at the ankles and the base of the big toes, soften your feet to receive your contact with the floor beneath you, and distribute your weight evenly between both feet. Now rock ever so gently forward and backward to center your weight just in front of each ankle joint. Tuck in your tailbone and lift through the crown of your head to lengthen and awaken the core support of your body. Gaze softly at a point 5 or 6 feet in front of you on the floor, so as to minimize distraction and help you



stay grounded. Gently shift your weight onto the left foot and raise your right foot off the floor until you feel fully centered over your left foot and leg. To help you feel this, you can imagine a bar of light beaming up from the earth between your feet while you are still on both feet, and visualize this beam ascending through the core of your torso and up through the crown of your head. Then, as you shift onto your left foot, feel that beam shifting with you to inform the center of your standing leg. Once your muscles have organized themselves around this core support, raise the right heel to your left inner thigh, close to the groin, and draw the left hip inwards towards your right heel. Bring your hands into prayer (*namaste*) position in front of your heart, then raise them high above the crown of your head, keeping your neck long and your shoulders released like loose sleeves. Rotate your right knee to the outside, while keeping your pelvis and torso facing forward.

Now, let's pause here. If you find yourself losing your balance, or falling, resist the impulse to emit a frustrated sigh, drop your foot to the floor, and start all over again. Living your yoga is an art. Just as an artist incorporates the surprises or unwilled events that present themselves in the course of a creative process as opportunities rather than mistakes or failures, stay focused, work (or play) with what you have. Easier said than done? First, be aware of the quality of your breathing. Breathe in and out of your nose to keep your attention inside your body. Allow your breath to flow without interruption, or holding. As you release holding in the breath cycle, the parts of your body that are resisting will also get the message to release. Sustaining this primary focus, the next time your body wavers, keep your mind centered. Think of softening your standing foot, and gently adjust the tensions of your feet muscles to bring you back to your centre. This may feel strenuous or stressful at first. Your feet muscles are in the process of being re-educated. What you are experiencing is a conflict of tensions as some muscles are resisting the re-distribution of tasks. You are the leader, and if you remain calm and steadfast, they will eventually unite in the co-operative effort to bring you to equilibrium.

OK, now gently lower your right foot back to Mother Earth, keeping your focus on the floor in front of you and the easy, continuous flow of your breath. Take this time to consciously receive the sensations from your body, as the blood pumped into the large muscles of your left leg flows back into the right side to balance your circulation.

Have you ever marveled at the adaptability of an old majestic tree gracefully embracing a huge rock with its roots as its trunk towers skyward? Surely you have felt its peace and strength. The Tree Pose offers us the opportunity to practice one of Mother Nature's grand principles: ***active acceptance***. The tree humbly accepts the presence of the rock and continues to grow around it. Together they create beautiful art out of their quiet striving. This is also our essential nature and our refuge, allowing us to embrace the challenges life offers us.

Now, let's put this into practice as we shift onto the other leg!