

Foundation of a Warrior

Cut through conflicting instructions on which way to turn your legs and pelvis in warrior poses.

BY Roger Cole ON January 29, 2014



You're supposed to rotate your thighs outward in *virabhadrasana II* (warrior II), right? But the thigh of the back leg rotates internally in *virabhadrasana I* (warrior I), doesn't it? And what about the front leg—is it internally rotated, externally, or neutral? Few instructions in yoga cast students and teachers into more of a muddle than the ones that explain which way to turn the legs and pelvis in warrior poses. The

actions of the legs in warrior I and II, you'll be happy to know, aren't all that different from each other. It's the position of the pelvis that really sets these two poses apart.

Put It in Neutral

Before you start trying to align your warrior legs, you need to understand neutral leg position. In your everyday posture, standing in "neutral" means that, when you place your feet parallel and straighten your legs, your weight will be balanced evenly between the inner and outer edges of each foot, and your knees will face forward, straight over your feet. This neutral position gives you a point of reference for all standing poses. In yoga, neutral stance means *tadasana* (mountain pose) legs; however, you'll soon see that *tadasana* takes neutral to a whole new level. To experience this, unroll your mat and place it perpendicular to a wall. Wearing something fitted so you can see your knees easily, stand at the center of the mat with both feet pointing directly at the wall.

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Tadasana Legs

Practicing neutral position in tadasana will help you refine the position of the legs so that they mimic the action of the back leg in virabhadrasana I, virabhadrasana II, and several other standing poses. You’ll begin to see that the leg and tailbone actions produce both inward-rotating and outward-rotating forces that counterbalance one another, so the thighbones end up in a neutral position in the hip sockets. The pelvis stays neutral, as well, because the forces that tilt the pelvis and sacrum forward and back also counterbalance each other. Once you learn how to engage the legs, you’ll see how these actions recur

in—and strengthen—your backbends, seated poses, and inversions.



1. Outwardly rotated. Look at your knees; press the outer edges of both feet down and lift the inner edges slightly off the floor. Notice that this turns your knees

outward. Return your feet and knees to neutral.

2. Inwardly rotated. Now turn your thighs strongly inward by straightening your knees and pressing your upper-inner thighs backward. You'll see that this makes your knees point inward and shifts the balance of weight onto the inside of your feet. It also makes the top rim of your pelvis tilt forward a bit, so your tailbone moves backward and your lower back arches slightly.

3. Tailbone stabilized. Return to neutral and inwardly rotate your thighs again. But this time, subtly press forward on your tailbone, not enough to push it forward, but just enough to prevent it from being pushed backward by the movement of the thighs.

4. Combine the three. Return to neutral once again. Now, straightening your knees firmly, simultaneously press your outer feet down, your upper-inner thighs back, and your tailbone forward, finely timing and balancing these efforts so the weight on your feet neither shifts toward the outer nor the inner side, your knees don't budge from their straight-ahead position, and your tailbone neither moves forward nor tilts backward. Your legs and pelvis are in the same neutral *tadasana* alignment you established earlier, but this

time it is more grounded, stronger, and steadier, and it gives a powerful lift and lightness to your spine.

Rotation Education

Now let's transfer these *tadasana* actions to the back leg in warrior II. Place the outer edge of your foot against the wall, and step your feet wide apart (about 3 1/2 to 4 1/2 feet). Keeping the heel on the wall, turn your left foot in so the little toe is slightly away from the wall (people with exceptional turnout at the hip joint may be able to keep the little toe touching the wall). Turn your right foot out 90 degrees in two stages of about 45 degrees each, first by lifting the ball of the foot and pivoting on the heel, then by lifting the heel and pivoting on the ball of the foot. Allow your pelvis to turn toward the right, along with the foot, so you can turn your right knee out a full 90 degrees. The right knee should now point directly over the right foot. Don't skimp on this.

Working With the Left Leg

The actions of the left foot will be the same as they were in the *tadasana* exercise. Straighten the left knee carefully, simultaneously press the outer edge of the foot down, draw the upper-inner thigh powerfully back

away from the wall, and press the tailbone toward the wall, counterbalancing everything so there is little or no actual movement of the leg or pelvis.

Balancing the Weight

Continuing these actions, slowly start bending your right knee directly toward your right foot, taking care not to let the knee move in toward the left foot. The more you bend your right knee, the more your weight will shift toward the inside of your left foot. You don't want that. So press the outer edge of your left foot down more firmly to keep the weight on the inner and the outer foot equal. The more strongly you press the outer foot down, the more the left knee will rotate outward, so counterbalance this by inwardly rotating the left thigh even more.

And there you have it: the action of the thigh of the back leg in warrior II combines intense outward rotation, caused by pushing the outer foot down, with intense inward rotation, caused by pushing the upper-inner thigh back. All of this results in little or no net rotation at all. If you can bend your right knee and hip each a full 90 degrees without compromising any aspect of the alignment just described, do it; if not, just bend as far as you can without losing your alignment.

Hold for a few breaths, then come up and repeat the sequence on the other side, applying the tadasana actions to your right leg and bending your left knee.



Focusing on the Right Leg

Now that you know how to work your back leg in virabhadrasana II, let's turn to the front leg. Take the pose again with the right knee bent. Place your right hand on the outside of your right knee and your left hand on the top rim of your pelvis on the left side. Pressing your right knee against your right hand, do not allow the knee to move either to the left or to the right of the left foot. Now use your left hand to guide the left side of your pelvis away from the right knee as far as it will go (it may not move far). Think of your pelvis as a door and your right hip joint as its hinge: as you swing the left side of the pelvis away from the right knee, the right side of the pelvis pivots around the hip joint, just as a door pivots around its hinge. This sideways, door-opening movement of the pelvis relative to the right thigh (called abduction)—rather than outward rotation—is the primary movement of the thigh of the bent leg in warrior II.

Two to One

Most of the leg actions you just learned in warrior II also apply to warrior I, but two key differences exist between the poses: first, in warrior I, the back foot turns inward much farther, and second, the “door” of

the pelvis swings *toward*, not away from, the bent knee. These two changes create huge differences in the way the poses feel. You can experience this in practice.

Getting Set Up



Place the short end of your mat against the wall and stand in tadasana with your heels against the wall, or as close as you can get them. Keep both feet pointing straight ahead, and step your right foot directly away

from the wall as far forward as it will go without lifting your left heel when both knees are straight. With your knees straight, turn the toes of your left foot to the left about 1 1/2 to 2 inches, so the foot is turned about 60 degrees away from the wall. Do not allow the angle between the foot and the wall to be less than 60 degrees.

Back Leg Tadasana

Straightening the left knee more firmly, simultaneously press the outer corner of the left heel into the floor, draw the upper-inner left thigh back toward the wall, and press the tailbone forward.

Now reinforce these actions as you gradually bend your right knee. Remember, the more you bent the right knee in warrior II, the more strongly you had to press the weight down on the outside of the left foot to prevent your weight from shifting too much onto the inside of the foot. The same thing happens in warrior I. But because the left foot points farther forward than in warrior II, bending the right knee shifts the weight strongly toward the front of the left foot, as well as the inner foot, focusing it on the ball of the big toe.

The more you bent the right knee in warrior II, the more strongly you have to press the weight down on the outside of the left foot to prevent your weight from shifting too much onto the inside of the foot.

To counterbalance that action, you need to press the outer back part of the foot (the outer corner of the left heel) down more strongly as you bend the right knee. But when you do that, your thigh will tend to rotate outward, so you'll need to rotate it inward more strongly by moving the upper-inner thigh back even more the deeper you descend into the pose. The net result of all this rotation and counter-rotation is that the back leg in virabhadrasana I does not rotate dramatically inward or outward.

What does happen, though, is that the back leg actions put a tremendous stretch on the calf, especially if you keep the knee strictly straight, as it should be. You'll

know you have gone deep enough into the pose when the left calf reaches its limit. Hold for a few breaths, come out of the pose, and practice it on the other side, repeating the back leg sequence.

And now the front leg. Return to the pose with the right leg forward, and simply bend your right knee directly forward toward your right foot, bringing it as close to a 90-degree angle as you can without losing the alignment of the back leg or foot. Don't allow the right knee to move forward beyond the ankle, but if it can't bend near 90 degrees—or reach as far forward as the ankle—don't worry.

The Pelvic Dance

When you first stepped your right foot forward to move from *tadasana* to *virabhadrasana I*—and again when you bent your right knee—your right hip moved forward while the left hip lagged behind, held back by the left leg. This turned your pelvis toward the left, away from *tadasana*. The left leg held the lower part of the pelvis back—especially the left sitting bone and the left side of the tailbone—more than the top of the pelvis, so the pelvis also tilted forward at the top.



When you practice virabhadrasana I, move your pelvis as if you are attempting to bring it back into tadasana, even though, anatomically, it can never arrive there. To do this, you need to combine two efforts. First, swing the entire left side of the pelvis forward toward the right knee (the “door closing” movement, which is technically known as adduction). Second, press the left

sitting bone forward more strongly than the rest of the pelvis, an action that will appear to tilt the whole top part of the pelvis backward (when in reality it simply reduces the amount of forward pelvic tilt). This sitting bone action, which also creates a stretch on the left front groin, tends to make the left knee bend, so as you practice the sitting bone action, put extra effort into straightening the back knee all the way.

The Cliffs Notes Version

These actions may seem like a lot to keep track of, but with diligent practice they will become second nature. If you do them faithfully, you'll not only feel a new stability and lift in your warrior poses, you'll also find them cropping up to help you in many other asanas.

So here's a recap of what to do with your legs and pelvis in warrior I and II.

1. In warrior I, turn the back foot in 60 degrees; in warrior II, turn it about 10 to 15 degrees.
2. In both poses, create tadasana actions in the back leg by straightening the knee strongly, pressing the outer side of the foot down, and moving the upper-inner thigh backward.
3. In both poses, bend the front knee directly toward a 90-degree angle without taking it beyond the ankle.
4. In both poses, hold the front knee and hip stable and use the front hip joint as a pivot point for the pelvis. In warrior I, the pelvis swings toward the bent knee, and in warrior II, it swings away from the bent knee.
5. In warrior I, make an additional effort to press the sitting bone of the back leg as far forward as possible to tilt the pelvis more upright.

All these actions may seem like a lot to keep track of, but with diligent practice they will become second nature. If you do them faithfully, you'll not only feel a new stability and lift in your warrior poses, you'll also find them cropping up to help you in many other asanas.

I Think My Bones Are Different

If your knees point outward or inward when you are standing with your legs straight, your feet pointing straight ahead, and your weight balanced equally between your inner and outer feet, you might have a skeletal trait called tibial torsion. In this case, when an asana calls for your feet to point in a particular direction, it's usually best to point your knees that way instead, turning your feet to the angle that puts the least stress on the knees.



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