





# take the leap!

Discover the transformative power of *devotion*

by letting your practice of Hanumanasana  
be *inspired* by the Monkey God himself.

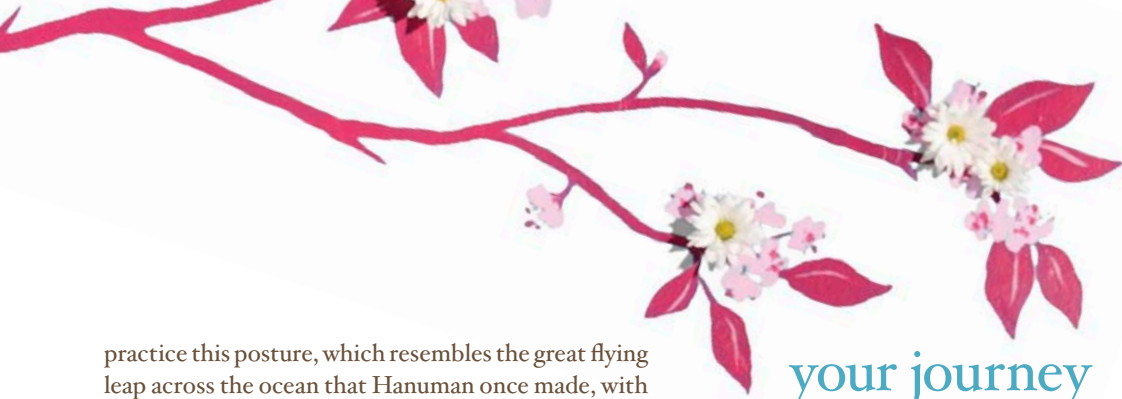
*If, when you see people* slide into the splits, you think that they must be members of a different species, you might shy away from Hanumanasana (Monkey God Pose). It's a challenging asana and can be frustratingly awkward. But whether or not you ever arrive in a full split with your pelvis rooted to the ground and your heart rising majestically upward, you will find power in practicing Hanumanasana.

Hanumanasana isn't an easy pose, says Noah Mazé, a well-known Anusara Yoga teacher who makes everything look effortless. Yet, he says, he loves it despite its being so difficult. The pose requires keeping your pelvis balanced while your front leg moves straight forward into deep flexion and your back leg goes directly back into deep extension, which means that both your hamstrings and your hip flexors need to be open.

Yes, Hanumanasana is quite a stretch for most of us, demanding intense effort and heartfelt dedication. Perhaps not coincidentally, these are among the very attributes that students of yoga revere in Hanuman, the Hindu deity for whom the pose is named. Hanuman, who takes the form of a monkey, is known as the embodiment of devotion and service. When you

by Bernadette Birney ❀ photography by Michael Winokur





practice this posture, which resembles the great flying leap across the ocean that Hanuman once made, with an understanding of what he represents, the pose can become an exploration of your own devotion and commitment to service. It offers an opportunity for you to consider what your practice, and indeed your very life, is devoted to and offered in service of.

### the monkey's tale

To get to this fertile ground, you need to acquaint yourself with the legend of Hanuman, which is told through one of India's most celebrated texts, the Ramayana. It's a rapturous tale—an epic love story filled with outrageous characters, dramatic plot twists, and all manner of magic and superhuman feats. Good translations of it read like literary novels, with such compelling action that you'll find it hard to put down. And the unfolding dramas provide a magnificent backdrop for the protagonist, Lord Rama (a human incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and the prince of a vast kingdom), to model divine behavior, deliver philosophical discourses, and test his mettle when confronted by the most provocative and dire of events. It is a spiritual teaching story par excellence.

We meet Hanuman in the fourth *kanda*, or book, of the Ramayana. At this point in the tale, Lord Rama (or just Ram) has been banished from his kingdom, and his wife, Queen Sita, has been abducted by demons. Ram is searching for her all over India, unaware that she has actually been spirited away to the island of Lanka (modern-day Sri Lanka).

There are many versions of the story, but in one common telling, Hanuman meets Ram and immediately discerns the prince's divine nature. While Ram's origins are indeed godly, his divinity is not something he wears on his shirtsleeve, and many characters he meets treat him as they would any other prince. That Hanuman recognizes the godliness in Ram is our first clue that Hanuman is tuned in, able to perceive something greater than appearances.

Hanuman soon offers both his allegiance and his assistance to Ram in the quest to find Sita. After fruitlessly scouring the landscape, they at last learn that

## your journey starts here

Take a comfortable seat and sit quietly for several breaths. Then Open to Grace (see "Playing with the Principles," on page 76). Feel the support of the energy around you. Turn inward and set an intention for your practice. If you can't think of an intention, consider embodying Hanuman's qualities of courage, dedication, and service today.

Warm up your body with 3 to 5 rounds of Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) and a few standing poses such as Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose), Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose), and Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II).

✿ sequence by Stacey Rosenberg

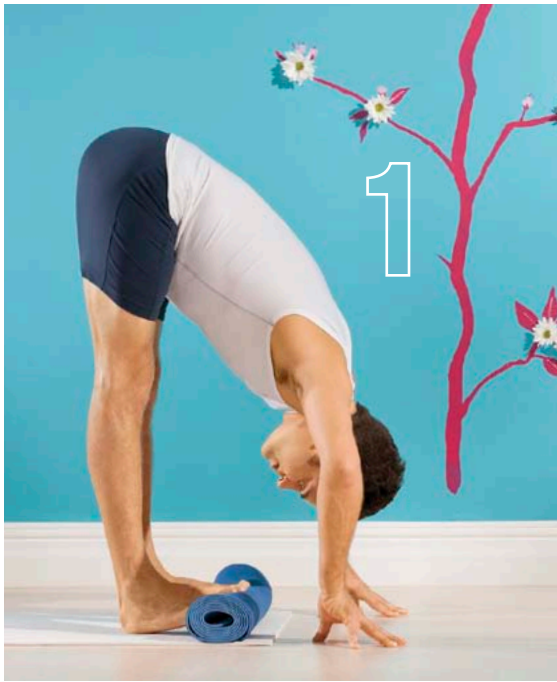
Sita was seen flying south in the sky chariot of the demon god Ravana. Realizing that they must cross the ocean to find her, Ram beseeches the gods to dry up the ocean or to make it part for him. When his prayers go unanswered, he falls into an agonizing depression.

### the power of devotion

Hanuman, from the depth of his devotion to Ram, taps into an inner power that allows him to grow to many times his normal size and leap across the ocean to Lanka in a single bound. This is the moment of the tale that most yogis hear about, because the pose Hanumanasana is named for Hanuman's bold leap.

Once he lands on Lanka, Hanuman quickly finds Sita and introduces himself as Ram's servant, who has come to rescue her. Sita is grateful but refuses to go, insisting that it is her husband's duty to save her. Hanuman reluctantly leaves her in the hands of the demons but begins an attack on the kingdom.

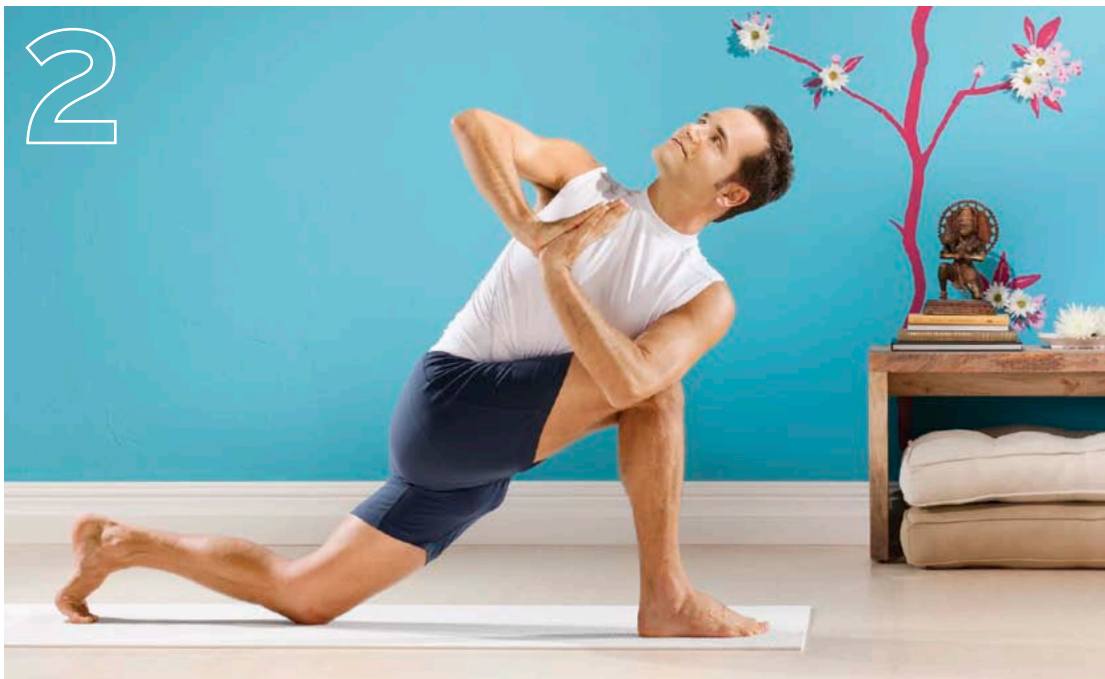
Hanuman eventually leaps back across the ocean to Ram. There, he joins an army of monkeys and bears who construct a bridge to Lanka, so that Ram can march to the demon kingdom. Hanuman remains by Ram's side throughout the journey and the devastating battles that rage between Ram and Ravana. At one point, Hanuman flies all the way to the Himalayas for medicinal herbs to heal Ram's wounded brother. In the end, Sita is rescued and Ram regains his happiness and his kingdom, thanks largely to Hanuman's devoted service. And



## *Uttanasana* (standing forward bend), variation

Roll a blanket or a sticky mat into a firm, tight roll. With your feet hip-width apart and parallel, place your metatarsals (toe mounds) on top of the roll and your heels on the floor.

Fold forward over your legs and touch the floor in front of you with your fingertips, or place your hands on blocks if you can't reach the floor. Lift and spread your toes and activate the muscles on all sides of your legs. Press the mounds of your toes firmly into the roll to engage your calves and hamstrings. At the same time, extend down through your heels to stretch the backs of your legs. Breathe into the pose for at least 1 minute with full presence and commitment. Step off the roll and feel the difference in your legs.



## *Parivrtta Anjaneyasana* (low lunge twist)

From Uttanasana step your left leg back and set your knee on the floor, keeping your toes curled under. Lift your spine, bring your hands onto your front thigh, and take a sweet inhalation to fill your inner body. Then exhale and soften your outer body. Place your left forearm or elbow on the outside of your right leg, breathing into your back body for a few cycles of breath. With each inhalation, isometrically draw your leg muscles up into your hips. With each exhalation, send your energy back down into the

foundation of the pose as you lengthen your spine through the crown of your head and spiral your torso open. Spend 3 breaths here; then lift your back thigh and straighten your knee for a few more breaths.

Keep hugging your shins toward the midline, which will not only line up the tissue of your hamstrings and widen your thighs, hips, and pelvis, but it will also remind you of your commitment to your endeavor. This dedication paves the way for a more thorough unfolding later in the practice. Maintain this commitment as you inhale and release the pose by lowering your back knee down and bringing your fingertips to either side of your front shin.

not only Sita, Ram, and Hanuman, but the whole kingdom rejoices and takes comfort in the sense that all has been made right in the world.

You could interpret the story of Hanuman, then, as a parable of what happens when you recognize the divine nature of life, offer yourself in service to it, and allow it to transform you in ways you never thought possible, so that you are even more capable of serving your highest ideals. And when you approach the pose with such inspiration, you're likely to enjoy your journey, no matter how "far" you go in the pose.

### playing with the principles

How exactly do you cultivate the qualities of Hanuman in your practice? One approach is to weave in the Universal Principles of Alignment from Anusara Yoga as you sequence your way toward Hanumanasana. Let's begin with Anusara's first principle, Open to Grace. This involves taking a few moments to become quiet, listen inwardly,

surrender, and connect with something bigger than yourself. The first thing you learn about Hanuman in the Ramayana is that he recognizes Ram's divine nature, which is another way of saying he is open to grace. He could see the divine where others saw the mundane.

Stacey Rosenberg, the certified Anusara Yoga teacher who created the sequence on these pages, emphasizes that taking the time to Open to Grace before you begin the physical sequence is essential, because it sets the stage for all of the other principles to unfold. She refers to this time of turning inward as the "inner leap"—you shift your energy and attention away from the external world and go inside yourself. You deepen your breath, soften your mind, and discover an intention for practicing. You might dedicate your practice to easing someone's pain, or to serving your highest ideals or your community's greatest needs. Or you might devote yourself to moving toward Hanumanasana with

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## Ardha Hanumanasana (half monkey god pose)

From Low Lunge, straighten your right leg and flex your foot. See that your back knee is underneath your hip or slightly behind it.

Press your right heel into the earth and isometrically drag it toward the back of your mat. Spread and press out through the mounds of your toes. As you inhale, engage your leg muscles, hug your shins to the midline, and draw energy from your foot up into your hips. Maintaining the dedication that you cultivated in the previous pose, take your right hand and manually give yourself an Inner Spiral: Wrap your fingers around the back of your right thigh and widen your hamstrings from

the inner thigh to the outer thigh. Keep that width and then use your hand to apply the Outer Spiral: With your fingers still pressing into the top of your hamstrings, draw your right hip back and press the hip and thigh down, toward the ground.

Scoop your buttock under, extending fully through your leg bones. As the right buttock wraps under, lift the front of your pelvis, shift your belly and ribs to the right, and with a long spine, pour your devoted heart over your right leg. Take 5 breaths as you stay deeply present and committed to the pose, noticing your thoughts and feelings as they arise.

## Anjaneyasana (low lunge), variation



Inhale as you lift your torso; exhale as you bend your right knee into a Low Lunge. With your left hand on the floor (or a block), twist to the right, bend your left knee, and hold the little-toe side of your left foot with your right hand. (Use a strap to bridge the gap between your hand and foot if necessary.)

Press your right heel and left knee into the earth and energetically pull them toward each other. Bring your left heel close to your outer left hip, even if you have to move your hips back to make that connection.

Once again, with commitment and dedication, draw your shins to the midline and widen your thighs. Lengthen your tailbone down through the left knee and press your foot into your hand. To deepen the pose, keep your back hip and heel together and allow your pelvis to move forward toward the front of your mat. If it feels appropriate to your body to deepen the pose, place your left forearm on the floor.

Take a few breaths here to turn inside yourself. Soften between your shoulder blades while you release down through your pelvis. Then actively root down through your legs and extend through your torso. With your shoulder blades on your back, turn your heart to the sky.

After several breaths here, slowly release your back foot, place both hands on the ground, and step your left foot forward to Uttanasana. Then repeat the same three-pose sequence on the other side. When you've done the sequence on both sides, step back into Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose).

## Pigeon Pose

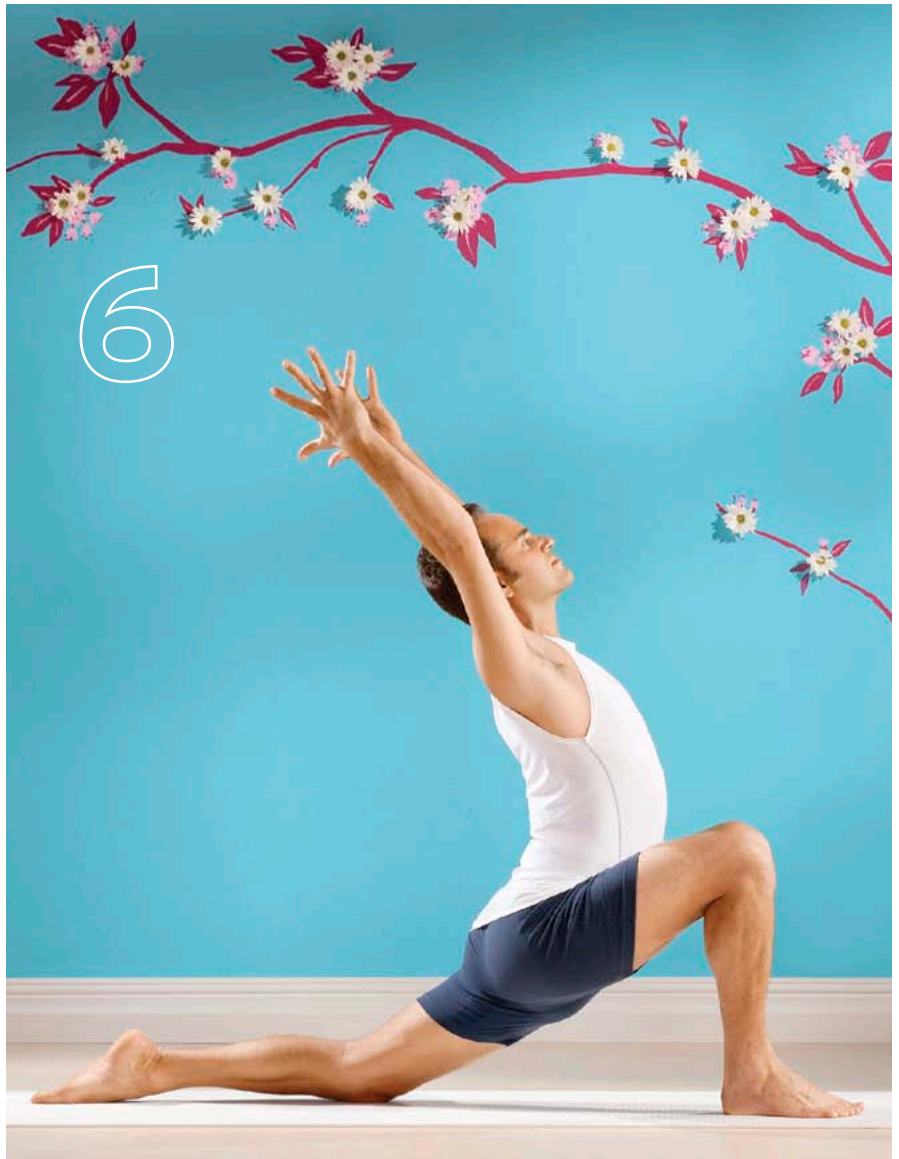
From Downward-Facing Dog bring your right knee to the outside of your right hand and lower your left knee to the ground. Bring your right shin as parallel to the front of your mat as your hips allow. This wider base helps to open the pelvis. It's perfectly OK for the pelvis to be off the floor here. In fact, it's better to keep your pelvis square toward the front of your mat and off the floor than to rest the pelvis on the floor unevenly.

Flex your right foot and tuck your back toes under. With an inhalation, isometrically drag your knees toward each other,

and draw your power and resources into the core of your pelvis. To prepare for his leap, Hanuman first has to draw deep inside himself. Use his example to call on the strength within you to widen your thighs, hips, and pelvis. Then exhale, lengthen your tailbone down, and extend your torso forward. Let your pelvis get heavy as you root it toward your back leg.

Lift the front of your pelvis up and extend your torso forward, softening your heart between your shoulder blades. Stay here for 5 breaths; then step back to Downward Dog and repeat the pose on the other side.





## Anjaneyasana (low lunge)

When you build this simple pose from the inside out, the outer form becomes a manifestation of your heart. From Downward Dog step your right foot forward, setting your left knee down on your mat with your back toes pointed. Look back at your left leg and make sure your foot is pointing straight back.

Pause and recall your intention as you settle into the pose. Then pull into your center and summon support on all sides of your legs. This will lift you out of the posture a little bit, but it will help you to reestablish alignment. Maintain your physical integrity as you lengthen your tailbone down and root your back leg and foot into the earth. Keep widening your back leg and hip as you extend your pelvis and front knee forward.

Place your hands on your hips and fill the inner body with breath as you lengthen the sides of your torso. Draw the heads of your arm bones back until your collarbones broaden and your shoulder blades come toward the spine. Lift your chin slightly and open your throat. Use your hands to press your hips down as you lift your heart up toward the sky. Stretch your arms overhead and shine your beauty out in all directions.

Stay here for 5 breaths; then release and step back to Downward Dog before performing the posture on the second side.

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self-compassion and a gentle attitude. Whatever arises, this first principle gives you a chance to devote yourself to the journey before taking action—just as Hanuman did.

From there, you begin the physical sequence and incorporate the next four principles into each pose. The second principle of Anusara Yoga is Muscular Energy, which involves drawing power from the periphery of your body to the core to create a stable and balanced foundation for your poses. Throughout this sequence, Rosenberg offers the Muscular Energy cue of drawing the shins in toward the midline. (This action helps align the tissues of the hamstrings and gives you greater access to the third principle, which is Inner Spiral.) It's a challenging action that requires strength and dedication not unlike Hanuman's, and it provides a sense of stability and integrity that will serve you well for the final pose. If you're flexible, maintaining Muscular Energy will prevent you from unconsciously flopping into Hanumanasana in a misaligned way,



which can put you at risk for injury. Muscular Energy symbolizes Hanuman's devotion and willingness to stick with the journey and to persevere, despite the many obstacles in his way.

The principle of Inner Spiral is an ever-expanding current of energy going from the feet through the pelvis and up to the waistline. In each pose in Rosenberg's sequence, you'll engage Inner Spiral by rotating your legs inward and drawing your inner thighs in and back.

Once you've established Inner Spiral in a pose, you apply the fourth principle, Outer Spiral, which is an ever-narrowing energy current that runs from the waistline down to the feet. Outer Spiral rotates the legs outward, moves the tailbone down and the thighs forward, and draws the thighs toward each other. You apply Outer Spiral as you maintain the action of hugging the shins in. Inner Spiral and Outer Spiral may feel like opposing actions, but they are meant to balance each other, and when applied together should bring you into your ideal alignment.

Rosenberg likens applying Inner and Outer Spiral to aligning all of your resources—your body, your mind, and your spirit—before you make that final leap

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## Hanumanasana (monkey god pose)

This pose asks you to draw inward and call upon the resources of your body, heart, and mind in order to pour your heart into the great leap of this experience.

With your right leg forward and your left leg back, place your fingertips on the floor or on blocks. Wherever you are, pause and soften. Renew your dedication to your intention.

Embody Hanuman's steadfast determination as you engage the muscles on all sides of your legs and lift slightly out of the pose. With this extra lift, you will be able to reestablish Muscular Energy, Inner Spiral, and Outer Spiral: Hug the shin bones in; widen your thighs, hips, and pelvis; and then draw your outer thighs and pelvis back and down.

Press your hands down to lift your torso up, curling open through your courageous heart. Then lengthen your tailbone down, extending fully through your legs to lower yourself toward the floor.

Keep the muscles toned and your legs extending so you are engaging and stretching simultaneously. Take 5 long, deep breaths, allowing your pelvis to get heavy and your heart to be light. As you open your heart into the backbend, see if you can connect to the intention you set at the beginning of your practice.

Keep the full engagement of your leg muscles as you pull yourself up and out of the pose. By learning to maintain engagement through the transition, you practice staying dedicated to your vision, even in the face of your greatest challenges.

Take a few breaths in Down Dog and feel the difference in your legs and hips. Then do the other side. If time allows, repeat the whole sequence 2 or 3 times; otherwise repeat Hanumanasana 3 times.





## take the leap

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outward in Hanumanasana. “You Open to Grace and think about your intention, your big vision. Then you pull inward with Muscular Energy and dedicate yourself to that vision,” she says. “With Inner and Outer Spiral, you get yourself in alignment with the action you want to create. And then—you leap!”

### expand and offer

With your body, mind, and heart in alignment, you radiate energy outward with a sense of expansion and freedom. This is Anusara Yoga’s fifth principle—Organic Energy—and it is the perfect place from which to take the figurative and literal leap into Hanumanasana.

In technical terms, Organic Energy is an outward extension of energy from the core to the periphery of your body—think the outermost planes of your body, including your fingers and your toes. It is thought to increase expansion, flexibility, and freedom in the pose. When Rosenberg teaches this stage of the pose,

she reminds her students that, no matter how close to or far from the ground they are, this final stage is really about the offering. In fact, Rosenberg encourages her students to use as many props as necessary (blocks under the hands and under the pelvis will often do the trick) so that they can safely lift the upper chest into a backbend without any strain on the lower back. When the pose is taught this way—that is, when you can feel its heart-opening aspects regardless of how low you go—you can literally make the pose a heartfelt offering to whatever your intention is. From that uplifted place, you may sense a natural connection to your most inspired dreams and intentions. The radiant, expansive energy you cultivate in the pose is, metaphorically speaking, the same energy that enabled Hanuman to grow gigantic and perform a superhuman feat in service to something that was far greater than himself.

When you are in the pose, notice the effort and grace you are capable of; notice the transformation and expansion that

occur in your body, heart, and mind when you devote yourself to practice. Then ask yourself, “To what do you want to devote yourself, your life?” You are capable of so much effort, so much grace, so much expansion! As you offer your effort to this Hanumanasana practice, you might consider the ways in which you want to offer your efforts off the mat—to your family, your community, your dreams. To what do you want to offer your dedicated effort and expansive heart in service?

As Rosenberg says, “It doesn’t matter where the final form of the pose lies. It doesn’t matter how many blocks you are lifted on. What’s really important is that you’ve decided to take this journey. Wherever you are in the pose, remember what you’re in service of. Think of the pose as an emblem of your heart.” ❖

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*Bernadette Birney is a certified Anusara Yoga teacher living in Connecticut, where she leads immersions, trainings, and retreats. You can find more of her writing on her yoga blog at [berniebirney.com](http://berniebirney.com).*

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