

Diwali and the yoga connection



As people around the world celebrate the five-day 'festival of lights', starting on November 3, Mayank Dhingra looks at the story of good defeating evil

Diwali is called the 'festival of lights' and commemorates the homecoming from exile of the mythical king Rama along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman, after the slaying of the demon king Ravana. Diwali is therefore also popular as the celebration of victory of 'good over evil'.

The story of Rama, as told in the epic *Ramayana*, has inspired many yogasanas. This month we will discuss the asana that is linked to a pivotal turning point in the story – Ravana declining the offer of peace and thereby setting into motion the momentous turn of events which led ultimately to his death.

Ravana's refusal to a peaceful resolution marked the first instance of a city being lit up in the story, however this was a violent and destructive play of fire in the city of Lanka. The second instance of a city being lit up comes at the end of the story when Rama returns home victorious and his city Ayodhya is lit up in celebration. This represents the benevolent and auspicious use of fire.

In the September issue, we discussed Hanumanasana, which symbolises Hanuman's leap from India to Lanka in search of Sita. Hanuman is the monkey-faced deity famous for his strength and devotion to Lord Rama and a central character in the *Ramayana*. The story behind *utkatasana* starts where the Hanumanasana story ends.

Utkatasana

When Hanuman entered Lanka he was surprised to see the splendour and beauty of the city. Vishwakarma, the architect to the Gods, had created a city of unsurpassed magnificence. After a lengthy search, Hanuman located Sita in a glorious garden called Ashok Vatika and identified himself

as an emissary of Rama by showing her Rama's ring. Sita was overjoyed that Rama was searching for her but refused to let Hanuman carry her back to safety, saying it would be an insult to Rama to win her back through such surreptitious means rather than by defeating Ravana in war.

Hanuman decided to meet Ravana to offer him a chance at peace. He realised the only way he could manage an audience with Ravana was to draw attention to himself and so he started uprooting the trees in Ashok Vatika, destroying the garden.

Ravana's soldiers tried to capture Hanuman but were defeated. Ravana then sent his youngest son Akshayakumara to detain Hanuman but Akshayakumara was killed in the ensuing battle. An enraged Ravana asked his strongest son Indrajit to defeat Hanuman.

Indrajit captured Hanuman by using the divine weapon Bramhasstra, which bound Hanuman, and produced

him before his father. Hanuman was immune to the powers of Bramhasstra, but out of deference to Brahma he allowed himself to be caught.

On reaching Ravana's court, he asked to be offered a seat befitting the messenger of a king. Ravana refused, but Hanuman was unperturbed and coiled his tail and made a seat for himself. Hanuman's seat was high and placed him in greater elevation than Ravana. This angered Ravana and he asked his soldiers to move his throne to a higher position. In response Hanuman made his tail grow longer. This game

continued and Hanuman pleaded with Ravana to return Sita and make peace with Rama. Ravana was livid and asked his soldiers to kill Hanuman. Ravana's brother Vibhishana reminded him that a messenger should never be put to death; this would be against the rules of royal conduct. Ravana was, however, in his right to punish Hanuman for his impunity. Ravana heeded his brother's words and ordered Hanuman's tail be set on fire and for him to be paraded through the streets of Lanka.

Having received immunity to fire from Agni and through Sita's prayers for his safety, Hanuman was

unaffected and, freeing himself, went about setting fire to Lanka by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. He doused his tail in the ocean and made his way back to Indian shores and to Rama.

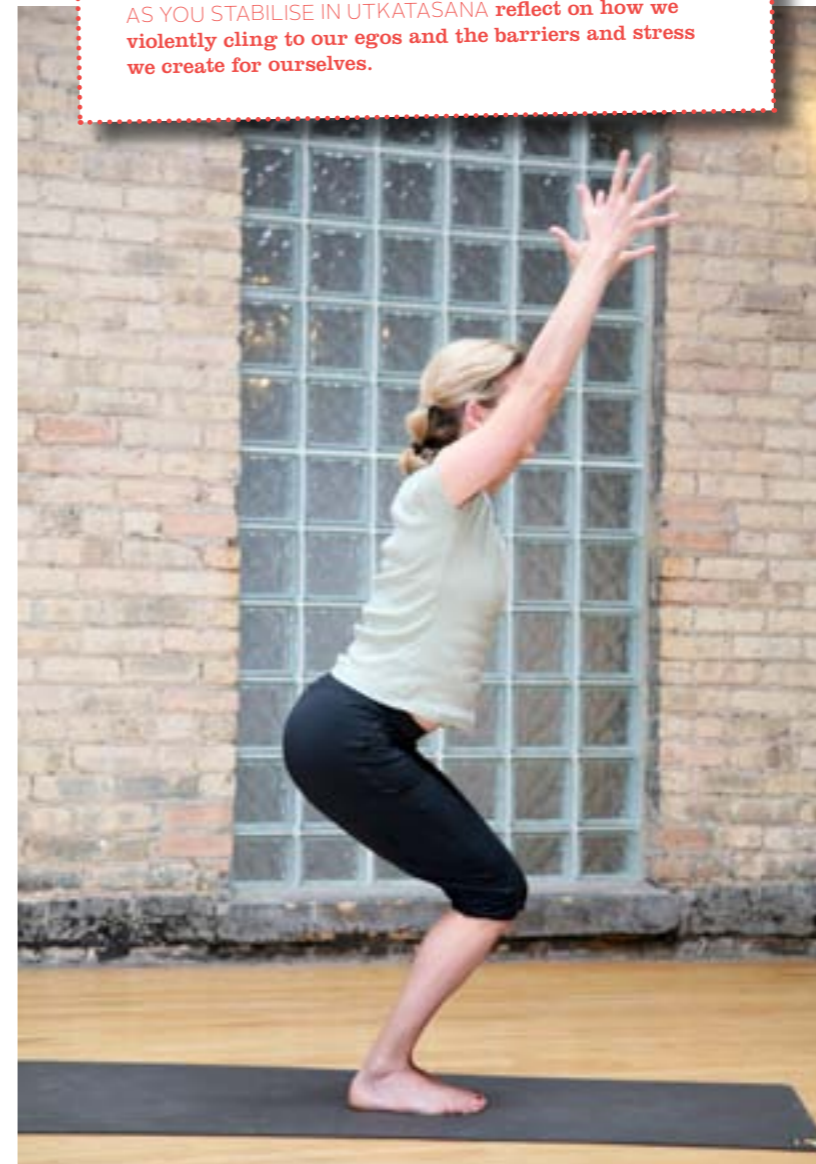
Hanuman's encounter with Ravana is illustrated through *utkatasana*. In English this pose is mistakenly called chair pose but the correct translation in Sanskrit (*utkata* means fierce and pride) gives a better understanding of the essence of the pose. It symbolises Ravana's attachment to his ego and his agitation in being unable to best Hanuman. On a physical level the asana is similar in to how a monkey appears when he jumps and the pose can be seen as a representation of Hanuman jumping from building to building setting Lanka on fire.

As the adept stabilises himself in *utkatasana* he should reflect on how we violently cling to our egos and the barriers and stress we create for ourselves. Subliming the ego helps us not only to connect better with others and the universe but also brings a sense of serenity and peace.

The subduing of the ego is a victory of 'good over evil'. When we conquer or control our lower nature – represented through emotions like pride, greed, envy – and let our higher nature shine through, we defeat our internal demons. And as the divine light sparkles inside us, our own Diwali celebration takes place within.

In the words of Swami Chidananda Saraswati: "Diwali is a festival of the light which dispels the darkness of our ignorance; it is a festival of the light which shows us the way on our journey through life. The purpose is not to glorify the light of the candle, or the light of the firecracker. The purpose is to glorify the light of God. It is He who bestows the real light, the everlasting light on the darkness of this mundane world. A candle burns out. A firework is a momentary visual experience. But, the candle of a still mind and the fireworks of a heart filled with bhakti are divine and eternal; these are what we should be celebrating." ❁

AS YOU STABILISE IN UTKATASANA reflect on how we violently cling to our egos and the barriers and stress we create for ourselves.



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