

Cat

Marjariasana/ Bidalāsana

It's hard to ascertain exactly where the Cat pose came from. I first encountered it when I became pregnant, and this deceptively simple movement was probably responsible for my departure from the Iyengar stable. I might have thrown up when I did a Dog pose, but doing the Cat felt divine ... There is no mention anywhere of a Cat pose anywhere in Iyengar Yoga, but I followed the Cat. If it's not in the lexicon, you don't do it. The Cat is non-existent. Though I later went back to Iyengar Yoga, I never could become a fully-fledged Iyengar disciple/teacher: the Cat had led me down quiet pathways impossible to deny. Utterly seduced by the insinuations and silent leads of the feline guru I still do this posture every day and feel, personally, that I am still learning.

The Bihar School include the Cat in their repertoire of postures, naming it 'Marjariasana'. It is also known as 'Bidalāsana'. The Cat pose illustrated in the Bihar book *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* is with a convex spine, but generally it is practised with fluid movements going from a convex to a concave spine. Both movements are characteristic of cats. The transition from the flexion of a convex spine to the extension of a concave spine is also known as 'Cat – Cow', though where this comes from – nobody knows. Certainly not from Iyengar Yoga. And as the spine of a cow is characterized by a rather indeterminate sort-of straight line it doesn't quite ring true ... as the posture seems to be evolutionary it seems reasonable to call the whole thing a Cat.

In any case, this simple movement from flexed to extended spine gives equal treatment to each of the vertebrae. The fact that the spine is parallel to the mat relieves the usual pressure of being a biped, and it's great to experience the space opening up between each of the

Cat

vertebrae. Indeed, one can practically imagine one is a Cat. It is a posture of reflection, of poised action. It is a fluid posture, one which invites one to explore inner avenues. I can see why and how it doesn't fit in with the long muscular holds of the Iyengar Yoga framework. And yet these longer, stronger postures really benefit from some preparatory insight.



Cats have more vertebrae than humans: the seven cervical are the same ¹as all humans and most mammals, but the thirteen thoracic means they have one more than humans

and the seven lumbar give them two more than humans – though there are three sacral vertebrae in cats whereas humans have five. Where cats really clock up the extra vertebrae is in the tail – generally twenty two or three caudal vertebrae (unless they are a Manx cat or a Japanese/Asian cat with a genetically shortened and often twisted tail). The tail stabilizes the rest of their body as they negotiate tricky terrain (rock to rock, sofa to curtains) and will always maintain them in a state of balance. The cat's tail is also a good indicator of their mood.

The whole of a cat's spine is very flexible as the vertebrae are cushioned by especially squishy and elastic discs which can rotate up to a hundred and eighty degrees; it is their ability to rapidly rotate their discs when in mid-air which allows cats to always land on their feet. Perhaps it is this extreme inner poise which lends them such dignity and their air of self-sufficiency. It can be illuminating to walk in their paw-prints.

Not that cats walk on their feet, exactly – they are digitigrades, which means they walk on their toes. They also walk with a 'pacing gait',

¹ <https://www.cgtrader.com/3d-models/animals/mammal/3d-model-of-cat-skeleton>

meaning that when they walk, they move the two paws on one side of the body before moving the two on the other side. Moreover, they plant the back paw almost exactly in the print of the front paw – increasing the stability of the back legs in order, perhaps, to pounce on prey. Unlike humans, whose shoulders are fixed to their collar-bones, cats are graced with free-floating clavicles, enabling them to ooze effortlessly through any space that their head will fit through.

Cats are naturally clean and exemplify excellent self-care. Their tongues are laden with overlapping keratin barbs designed to rip the flesh of their prey from the bones. The feline tongue is its busiest muscle, and is used for everything from licking new-born kittens into life to cleaning their bums. When they lap at water it is at 4 laps per second – an extraordinary sight when viewed in slow motion as they compel a column of water into their mouth. Do look at our cats lapping up cream! ²

From expensive silky-pelted Bengal pedigree cats to regular short-haired moggies, cats come in all shapes and sizes. The domestic cat as we know it is descended from the near Eastern wildcat from the Fertile Crescent of North Africa³ and goes back possibly as far as 70,000 years. Apparently it was a `genetic variance'⁴ that led the wild cats to seek human company – possibly starting with agricultural farmers, who are to this day glad of the presence of cats to keep the marauding rodents at bay.

It has been said that dogs have owners and cats have servants – though `slaves' would be more appropriate. Cats can be independent in their opinions and preferences, but have no shame about fawning around a human's legs when they want food or attention. Their mysterious unblinking eyes demand servitude and adoration and it is not in a cat's

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzVzmweisws>

³ <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/06/070628-cat-ancestor.html>

⁴ Ibid

Cat

nature to give anything but love and affection in return. Perhaps it is this sense of unbridled entitlement, balanced by the gracious bestowing of emotional rewards, which led to the deification of cats in Egypt.



5

On a practical level, cats were appreciated for their ability to keep rats from the granaries and could even keep cobras at bay. In the British Museum we can see the painting of Neb-Amun hunting fish and birds in the marshes with his ginger cat. Cats were so important that the penalty even for accidentally killing a cat was death, and they were regularly mummified after their death. The cat deity was Bastet – sometimes depicted as a seated or standing female with a feline head –

⁵ <http://www.heritage-history.com/?c=read&author=church&book=storiess&story=manners> (6.3.'18)

Cat

who was originally associated with warfare and later with fecundity and protection.

These two attributes nicely encapsulate the paradox of the cat: from the brutal insouciance with which they will play with a dying mouse to the maternal care they lavish on their kittens and the exceptionally tight bonds they can form with their owners (sorry - I mean 'slaves') - their spectrum is breathlessly wide.

What can we learn from cats in our Yoga practice? Marjariasana is a deceptively simple posture in which are embedded clues to transform our whole practice. By placing the spine parallel to the earth we put it in 'dry dock' for observation and repair. When held in attentive neutral, we alleviate the daily stresses and observe where there is tension and where we need to develop strength. By imagining we are a cat we can really tune into our own inner flexibility and, without forcing anything, explore the relationship between the spine, the limbs, the digits of the hand and feet, and the head. We can look at possibilities for growth, for roaming – like a cat – well beyond our familiar territory, upheld from within by an inner confidence in our own abilities. By paying attention to the characteristics of the feline after whom the posture is named, we can reset the undercurrent signals from our heads, shoulders, tails and toes ... for a start.

With familiarity and repetition, the apparently simple Marjariasana can become the gentle spring-board for developing many a practice: Hasta Mudras, Mula Bandha, Nadi Sodhana, Ujaiyi, Bhramari, Simbhasana, Jalandhara Bandha, Uddiyana Bandha, Shakti Chalana, Agni Swara – to name a few.

Cats like to play. By playing, they develop their reactions, fine-tune their instincts and up their chances for survival, (as children can develop and benefit from play, as well). Personally, I believe that cats are sent from another planet to look out for us. Cats can be our spiritual guardians

Cat

and best companions (there are exceptions of course – in the case of allergies they are not helpful). What does it matter if I'm right or wrong? Like a cat, I just don't care – as long as there's food, fire, good company and solitude when whim dictates - free will is nurtured and vitality prevails.

The cat both liberates and enslaves us. It liberated me from the tyranny of an inflexible Yoga regime and now I am daily enslaved to the playful truth of my own practice. No law in the world can take that away. The cat is not swayed by opinions or dictates. The cat follows the path of freedom and independence – but, like the great artists, is not afraid to seek out patronage and sponsorship for survival. The cat will co-operate and then, on a whim, walk away, swishing its tail. The cat is cool. The cat is divine. Even if we are allergic – by paying attention to ourselves in the manner of a cat, we can tune into the inner path of our individual liberation. This is Hatha Yoga.