

### Backbends in Yoga

Spinal extension is not exactly unnatural, but it does have to be cultivated; when we want to protect ourselves, we curl inwards; when we want to show our light to the world we might leap in the air, back arched, head flung back and arms spread out wide ... and sadly the human species tends more towards the former than the latter ... which is why practicing back-bends on the Yoga mat is so good for us. When we extend the spine, we open our hearts; the breath deepens, we absorb more oxygen, the psoas muscles lengthen and we become flushed with positive energy. It is impossible to be depressed after practicing back-bends ... and some might claim it is impossible to practice back-bends when depressed. The benefits of cultivating a regular practice means that we don't depend upon whether we feel like it or not: we just do it, and everything else follows.






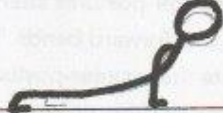


Having said that, we do have to be careful also. Because backbends are not an integrated part of our everyday mobility, their practice can sometimes release things hidden in the spine: unspoken dark thoughts such as resentment, bitterness, anger, jealousy – all the hidden poisons which we never knew were there till they reveal themselves in a black flash. This is not always a bad thing – I remember someone once telling me how after a strong session of back-bends she went back to work and told her boss exactly what she thought of him. She then moved on to higher things. Sometimes however the dark stuff gets misdirected – so we have to be mindful.

For the health and safety of all concerned, it's better to regularly practice backbends moderately than to occasionally practice them at full-strength; and it is extremely important to prepare for them and to practice appropriate counter-postures afterwards. Immediate counter-postures include twists and forward bends. The stronger the back-bend practice, the more moderate the counter-postures. That way we extinguish the negative effects while the positive ones twinkle on.

The benefits of back-bending include increased vitality, strength, vigour and positive outlook. Back-bending opens the lungs, stimulates the central nervous system, improves digestion, encourages the dominance of the parasympathetic nervous system and boosts the immune system. They work on all the chakras: it is impossible to do a good back-bend without considering both the gravitational pull of the earth and the upward dynamic of Space. They also stimulate the appetite!

Back-Bending

Backward Bending (Extension of Spine)

Virabhadrasana I - Warrior I	
Anjaneyasana - Lunge	
Salabhasana - Locust	
Bhujangasana - Cobra	
Makarasana (Bihar) - Crocodile	
Urdhva Mukha Svanasana - Up-Dog	
Dhanurasana - Bow	
Chakrasana - Wheel	

## The Raw Spine

When we extend the spine, the natural curves of the spine are in turn exaggerated and rearranged. When we stand in Tadasana, the lumbar and cervical areas of the spine are in natural extension, while the thoracic spine is in a state of natural kyphosis and the pelvis is in neutral ... maybe. The toll of daily life often causes increased kyphosis in the upper back, a slumping of the lumbar spine and some rather unnatural positioning of both the head and the pelvis, which try to compensate.

One reason why it is so beneficial to practice back-bends is that they wake up the spine and alert us to the fact that we need to support the spine with muscles and breath just as much as we need the spine to support us.

In order to avoid over-working one part of the spine over others, the spine should always be considered as one unit; nonetheless, the vertebrae of each section perform individual and varying tasks according to their differing structures. The vestigial vertebrae of the coccyx are not useless: they act as important muscle attachments for the pubo-coccygeal muscle, whose work initiates the job done by the rest of the pelvic floor muscles (including the subtler aspects of Mula Bandha).

The 5 fused sacral vertebrae form a bowl in conjunction with the iliac bones, and are an important area of exchange: here the upper and lower, right and left, front and back of the body negotiate with one another about how best to distribute the task of getting about in the world. All too often there is a back-log of connections to deal with, resulting in tension around the pelvis and lumbar spine. The male pelvis is narrower than the female, as the female is designed to accommodate pregnancy and birth. The sacro-iliac joints are naturally quite shallow and the interface of the joint may become fused in males. Conversely, as females produce more softening hormones in order to propagate the human species – they may develop instability in the sacro-iliac joint – usually more on one side than the other. It is of course possible for men to develop sacro-iliac problems but generally speaking the male pelvis is a lot more fixed than the female one – which is noticeable particularly in forward bends but needs to be just as much considered in back-bends.

The vertebrae of the lumbar spine are broad and strong, designed for weight-bearing. Because they can, they do – and all too often over-do. When we do back-bends we release accumulated tension from the lumbar

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spine by working the dorsal muscles, improving blood flow and re-negotiating the deal with the pelvis. Lumbar vertebrae respond well to back-bends and often are the first to extend but we still have to be careful that we do not over-do the extension, just because they can. A period of rehabilitation is necessary when preparing for back-bends which takes into account the fact that the lumbar vertebrae often over-work.

The thoracic vertebrae are much more narrowly placed one against the other. They act as attachments for the twelve ribs, which in turn protect the lungs and upper digestive tract. Their default position is to be slightly curved back, but unfortunately life-style and genetics sometimes combine to over-curve. The thoracic vertebrae can even fuse together, causing breathing difficulties and knock-on effects in the shoulders, neck and head. The lower, floating ribs may curl in, inhibiting the influx of breath into the lungs. By breathing efficiently into the ribs, we open up the thoracic vertebrae.

The cervical vertebrae may well find themselves drawn forwards by the head into a state of semi-permanent tension. The narrowly-spaced vertebrae often start to deteriorate and/or to fuse with age, and this impacts upon the blood flow to and from the head which passes through small apertures in the cervical processes. The lower cervical vertebrae are especially vulnerable.

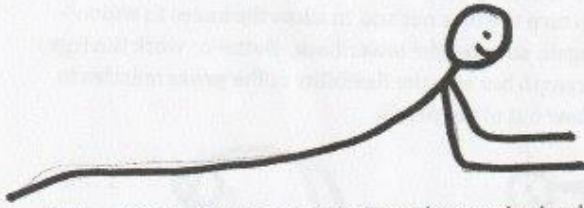
The head, though not officially part of the spine, is very much part of the spine: unconsciously we can allow the weight of the head to compensate for poor posture while the spine is often compromised by dealing with the knock-on effects. Back-bends wake us up to the reality of the spine, helping us to be more conscious of how we move and manage the spine in daily life.

### What happens in a back-bend?

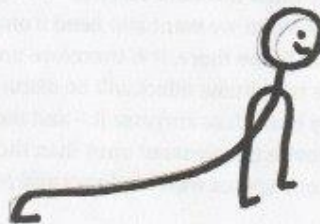
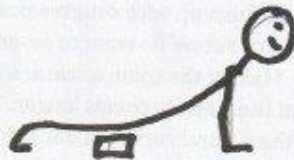
Different back-bends work in different ways; Salabhasana, for example, demands that we use our muscles and breath to work against gravity to uphold our body weight. The pelvis remains fixed to the earth, the lumbar spine increases its arch and the positioning of the arms will impact the slow and opening journey of the thoracic curve.

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A gentle Salabhasana might be recommended for people suffering from Sciatica, as it depends on the body's own innate strength to support it and so cannot be forced; a Cobra, on the other hand, could be forced – the temptation of the hands on the floor is too much ... which is why it is always better to start preparing the spine for a Cobra with gentle sphinx-like movements, in which the forearms support the thoracic spine in breathing length into the lumbar spine before there is any possibility of compression.



Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Up-Dog) leaves the lumbar spine vulnerable and so it is important to proceed slowly, ensuring that it is supported not only by hands and feet, but also by the knees and elbows. If the fingers are well-spread and the elbows slightly bent (ie not locked), the shoulders are actively supporting the lumbar spine; if the knees remain on the mat (or block), the load is not so severe on the lumbar spine. If the knees are off the mat, it is good to start with the toes tucked under and the heels moving back with each exhalation in order to drain the stress off the lumbar spine. And at all times it is important to keep the abdominals working back towards the lumbar with each exhalation, thus creating support from below.



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Dhanurasana is a stronger back-bend which is vulnerable to the possibility of end-gaming because there is contact between the hands and the ankles. Using a belt can reduce the possibility of stress on the lumbar spine and ensure that the lungs are breathing freely; too much of an arch can restrict the breath, resulting in unnecessary strain to the heart.



One needs strong arms, open shoulders and firm, strong legs to do Chakrasana. It is tempting to turn the toes out and to allow the knees to widen – but not a good idea, as this again stresses the lower back. Better to work the legs and increase not only the strength but also the flexibility of the psoas muscles in order to allow the spine to flow out of the pelvis.



All back-bends require practice. Repetition is the key. Because we do not do them as much as we might, they are often approached with a fiery determination – which is unhelpful. Working as they do on Manipura Chakra, whose element is already that of fire, they can burn us up if we are not careful. We need to approach back-bends with focused calm and love. It is important to come out of back-bends as carefully as we went in, and to observe the effects on the mind at all times.



Having done back-bends and followed them up with counter-postures, the spine will be stronger, freer and more alert. Yet we do want to revert to the natural curves of our own individual spine. Making the spine unnaturally straight is known as 'axial extension' – meaning that the spine becomes longer. Though back-bending temporarily straightens out the natural curves of our spines – and though we may become taller if we did carry the straightening on into our daily lives – it is unnecessary. What we want and need from back-bends is to return to who we are, and to be at home there. It is therefore unnecessary to huff and puff into back-bends, as the take-home effect will be disturbing. Better to kindly tease out the spine on a daily basis than surprise it – and though the spine is full of surprises, it better to invite the pleasant ones than those of an altogether darker nature. So let us treat our spines with kindness and respect and they will reward us a thousand-fold.

## Bhujangasana

### Cobra

'Bhujangasana' literally means 'crooked-armed', but is generally translated as 'Serpent' or 'Cobra'. The Gheranda Samita describes it thus:

'Let the body, from the navel down to the toes, touch the ground, place the palms on the ground, raise the head (the upper portion of the body) like a serpent. This is called the Serpent-posture. This always increases the bodily heat, destroys all diseases, and by the practice of this posture the serpent-goddess (the Kundalini life-force) awakes.' (2,31)

The spine replicates that of a serpent and the limbs are subsidiary to the spine. In a human, the lumbar spine is naturally the most supple and the thoracic spine the stiffest; lower back problems occur and are painful, and upper back problems are usually characterised by loss of sensation. It is important to identify with the whole of the spine: this will prevent the head being thrown back and repercussing on the base of the neck (C7) which is another place where problems often manifest. By lengthening the lumbar spine forwards and up we can shift some of the intervertebral space into the thoracic spine. It is important not to lift up too strongly with the arms but rather to let them follow the spine.

#### Precaution:

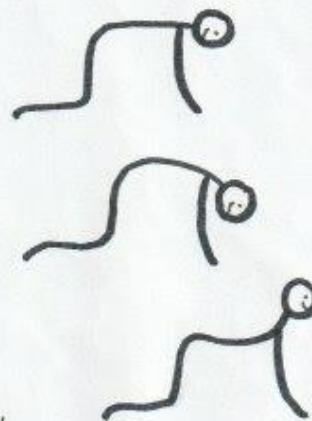
Cobra is said to be good for people with lower back problems, especially slipped discs. However, every lower back injury is individual and different, and it is important to remember that for some people, any kind of Cobra, even Sphinx, can be painful. If the back pinches at any stage, come back down into Adho Mukha Svanasana or roll over into Apanasana.

Bhujangasana is a heating posture, and can be hard work. It should not be held for more than five breaths at a time. Come down and rest and counter-balance with Adho Mukha Virasana/Apanasana whenever necessary.

#### Preparation:

Cat: Be on all fours, hands under the shoulders, fingers spread with the middle fingers parallel to one another. Inhale and make the spine, from the tailbone to the crown of the head, concave. Do not dip the lumbar spine fully on the inhalation, but rather take the slack up the spine, vertebra by vertebra, in order to increase the space between each. Exhale and round the back, using Mula Bandha, and release the lumbar vertebrae by moving the navel back towards the spine.

On the inhalation, allow the head to raise in accordance to the amount of uplift in the upper spine. Do not throw the head back.



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## Bhujangasana Preparation

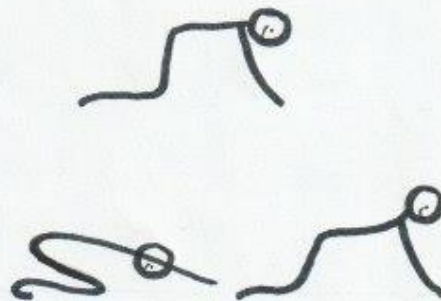
Long Cat: Place the hands ahead of the shoulders, fingers spread, and with the exhalation draw the pelvis back, using the Mula bandha and stretching through the shoulders, allowing the head to drop between the arms by the end of the exhalation; on the inhalation, come forwards till the pelvis is over the knees and lift up through the thoracic and cervical spine, allowing the skin of the abdomen to lengthen and the front of the shoulders to open.

Repeat as appropriate and rest down in Adho Mukha Virasana

Sphinx: Lie prone with the elbows a little ahead of the shoulders, forearms parallel, fingers spread as in the Cat. Lengthen the spine forwards and up on the inhalation. Keep the legs together and, on the exhalation, engage Mula Bandha and reinforce an alertness in the legs, keeping the inner ankles together. Allow the breath to support the spine, maintaining lightness within the shoulders, throat and face.

### Working the upper back:

Prone, place the hands on the floor under the shoulders, with the upper chest slightly lifted. Inhale and, pressing the palms of the hands into the floor, move forwards and up in a slow, steady curve, so you feel a backwards, circular action in the shoulders. Exhaling, reinforce the stretch and stability in the legs. Rest down when necessary.





### Full Cobra:

The placement of the hands depends on both the length of the arms in relation to the spine and on the suppleness of the spine. The further forward the hands are on the floor, the gentler will be the curve of the spine. If in doubt, start with the hands well forwards and work them back on progressive 'takes'.

Use the breath as above to move the spine forwards and up to lift. Keep the front of the shoulders open and the skin on top of the shoulders rolling back. Breathe into the upper side chest. The pubic bone remains on the floor.



With each exhalation, feel the pelvic and leg muscles working to maintain a firm foundation. If the elbows do come up from the floor, keep the shoulders dropped and bend the elbows. Only straighten the arms if it is comfortable to do so while keeping the shoulders dropped. Allow the muscles of the spine to lead the stretch, assisted by the muscles of respiration. Keep the face soft and the attention absolutely on breathing in and out of the space between each of the vertebrae. Allow the mysterious energy of the snake to evolve naturally.

### Counterposture:

As Bhujangasana is a heating posture, it should be followed by a calming posture such as Apanasana, forward bends and simple twists.



Benefits: Bhujangasana strengthens the spine and is a good purifying posture: it squeezes the kidneys and creates space for the liver. It promotes blood flow in the bladder and reproductive organs and is helpful with cystitis and period pains. It increases energy and stimulates the appetite. Properly done, it is helpful in counteracting kyphosis and scoliosis.

Prohibitions: Pregnancy, certain back problems and recent abdominal surgery.

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