

# reinvent your wheel

By targeting your tight spots, you can go deep  
and discover your best backbend ever.

**AH, BEAUTIFUL URDHVA DHANURASANA.** As the arms and legs press strongly down into the ground like pillars, the entire length of the spine curves into a deep, even arch. It's striking, it's inspiring, and it's... well, everywhere. Walk into nearly any hatha yoga class at any time of day, and you're likely to encounter the pose that is also known as Upward Bow or Wheel Pose.

It's easy to feel simultaneously seduced and humiliated by Urdhva Dhanurasana. The pose might evoke a burning desire to achieve and conquer this backbend, but if you're a beginner, you might feel fearful that you won't make it up. And if you're a more experienced student who has pressed up dozens of times, you might find yourself wondering, "Is it still supposed to feel like this? Am I supposed to feel the lower-back twinges, the shoulder soreness, and the occasional after-class sacral aches?"

In either case, when fear or frustration about Urdhva Dhanurasana arises, the first impulse is often to rely on pure force to muscle yourself into the pose. When you do, there are a few telltale signs that this is happening. You hear yourself grunt as you go up. You feel your knees and feet kick out. You push up quickly

and pop your shoulders out of joint, overstretching the delicate rotator cuff muscles. A large, pulsing vein bulges out on your forehead. Do any of these things sound familiar? Such a brutish approach to Wheel not only puts your muscles and joints at risk for injury, but also unravels all the hard work you've done maintaining the integrity of your breath.

Fortunately, you can strike a balance between yearning and frustration. To do so involves the yogic concept of self-study, known as *svadhyaya*. Instead of pushing yourself into the pose, you can apply *svadhyaya* by refining your awareness of what is happening in your body and mind. One way to do this is by breaking down the pose into three components and assessing how your body responds to each. Urdhva Dhanurasana requires openness in the shoulders and chest; flexibility in the front of the hips, legs, and abdomen; and suppleness in the back body. It also requires arm and leg strength, but if you're able to hold a

photography by Rory Earnshaw  
by Andrea Ferretti and Jason Crabbell



*On the following pages, we give you poses that are efficient at opening the legs, shoulders, and back. Use them to explore your body, noticing areas of tightness and areas of ease. You can incorporate these poses into your practice as an excellent preparation for Urdhva Dhanurasana. Or, if, for example, you notice that your thighs are disproportionately tight, you can incorporate the poses for your legs into your daily practice—whether sequencing to Wheel or not.*

well-aligned Plank for five deep breaths, you're probably strong enough to do the pose. When muscular tightness releases, the pose requires less force.

Armed with this knowledge of the architecture of the pose, you can create sensible, thorough sequences that open your shoulders, hips, and trunk before practicing Urdhva Dhanurasana, allowing you to backbend more deeply and comfortably.

You can also begin to notice where you get hung up in the pose. Many practitioners are disproportionately restricted in one region. You might be surprised to find that your shoulders are naturally very open, but your thighs are so tight that you can't lift your hips without your feet splaying out. If that's the case, then you have a clear starting place from which to work—you can spend time in your daily practice cultivating openness along the front of your legs, abdomen, and hips. Or you may find that your shoulders and hips are plenty malleable, but there is stubborn resistance in your mid-back. Spending more time opening the torso will allow you to develop more ease in Urdhva Dhanurasana. In essence, refining your awareness will enable you to make choices that will create transformation.

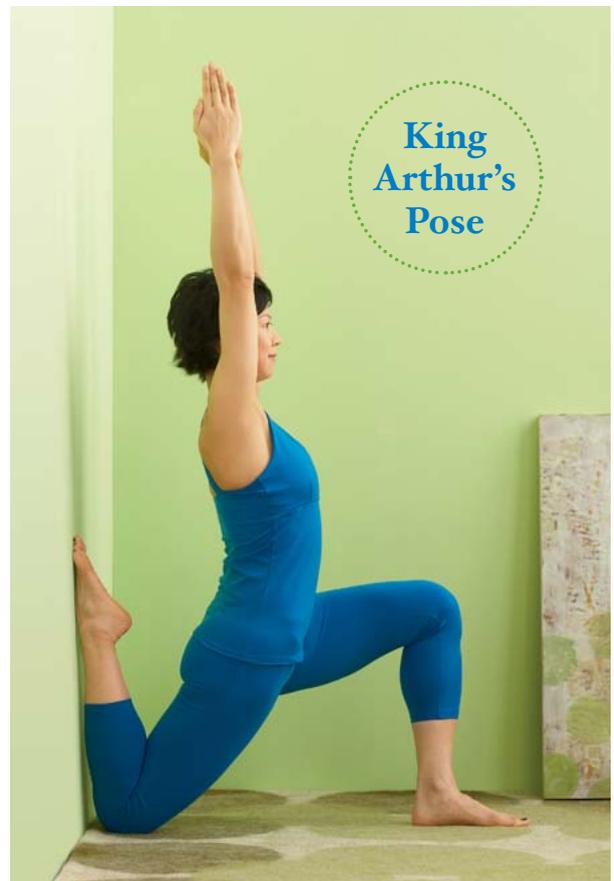
As you practice breaking down the pose this way, don't be disappointed if you're one of those folks for whom each component is difficult. A deep pose may be beautiful, but the depth of your Urdhva Dhanurasana is not the most important thing. What's most important is that you develop a method that forgoes ego and force in favor of exploration and awareness. If you can do that, you can build a backbend that works for you—one that exhilarates, stretches, strengthens, and soothes you all at once. Ready to begin?

## lengthen your thighs

Most students know that a healthy forward bend requires suppleness in the back of the legs. This type of flexibility enables you to rock the pelvis forward over the thighs, allowing the spine to lengthen and release. A similar principle applies to backbends. A healthy backbend requires suppleness along the front of your legs and abdomen. In order to arch your spine into a backbend without crunching your lower back, you need to open the front of the thighs so you can rock the pelvis backward over your legs.

If you spend much of your day sitting, this can be difficult to accomplish. Sitting flexes the hip joints, which can make the muscles along the front of the hips tight and may impede your ability to move your pelvis into backbends.

King Arthur's Pose and Bridge Pose are perfect preparations for Urdhva Dhanurasana because they help release tension from the front of the thighs and hips. Bridge Pose will give you adequate practice with the positioning of your feet, legs, and hips for Urdhva Dhanurasana.



Love it or loathe it, **King Arthur's Pose** will elongate your tight thighs efficiently. Start by folding your sticky mat in quarters and placing it next to a wall. Kneel with your back to the wall, place your right knee on your sticky mat, and extend your right shin (foot pointed) up the wall. Step your left foot forward two to three feet so that you are in a lunge, with your left knee situated directly above your ankle.

Place your hands on your hips and observe the angle of your pelvis. Your hips will probably tilt forward, since this allows your body to avoid stretching your thighs. To improve your alignment and facilitate greater opening, lift the front of your pelvis and lengthen your tailbone and buttocks toward the floor. Increase this stretch by bending your front knee deeper as you draw upward through your abdominal core. If you really want to challenge yourself, press the top of your right foot against the wall. This will engage your thigh muscles as you stretch them, creating more intensity.

To enter the second phase of the pose, vigorously extend your arms up toward the ceiling. As you reach up, lengthen your spine and lift your ribs further away from your hips. Complement this by bending your front knee and lowering your hips further. Remember to draw your tailbone toward the floor and retain the neutral position of your hips.

Breathe slowly and deeply into your abdomen. After 10 to 15 breaths, release your hands to the floor and take your right shin off the wall. Pause for a moment before you switch sides.



## Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

An ideal way to continue opening the front of your thighs and hips is to take Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, or **Bridge Pose**, which offers a blueprint for the leg and foot positions in Wheel.

To begin, lie back, bend your knees, and place your feet hip-width apart. Bring your feet close to, but not touching, your hips, and align your arms alongside your body. See that the outer edges of your feet are parallel and that your toes are pointing straight forward.

Initiate the pose by gently pressing your lower back into the floor so that your tailbone curls slightly upward. Root down through your feet and begin to peel your hips away from the floor. Mindfully, roll up, vertebra by vertebra, and lengthen your tailbone toward the back of your knees. Tuck your shoulders underneath your chest. Interlace your fingers—or hold the outer edges of your sticky mat—and burrow downward into the mat with your arms.

Continue to lengthen your tailbone and your lower back, and shift your attention to your legs. Align your thighs so that they are parallel to each other, and position your knees directly above your ankles. Keep your shins vertical. This is the way you set the feet and legs for Wheel. Breathe slowly and deeply into your abdomen. After 8 to 10 breaths, walk your feet away from your hands and slowly lower to the floor.



# free your spine

In a comfortable, healthy backbend, your entire back—lower, middle, and upper—will have a similar degree of sensation. In an uncomfortable and poorly distributed backbend, parts of your back will have intense sensations, and other parts will feel dull. Most people immediately feel the sensation in the lower back (because it's more flexible and often bears the brunt of the curve) and less sensation in the middle and upper back. In order to bring the spine into greater harmony during Urdhva Dhanurasana, you will need to awaken the thighs and shoulders, and prepare the torso and spine. Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana with a chair and Bhujangasana will teach you to distribute the curvature of your back evenly.

## Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana, variation

Support your weight on a chair in **Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana** (Two-Legged Inverted Staff Pose) to open your chest and shoulders, stretch your abdominal area, and encourage length in your spine. When the chair is in the correct place, this pose will distribute the sensations of the backbend evenly along your spine, providing a somatic reference for what an ideal Urdhva Dhanurasana feels like.

Place a chair close to a wall (not on a sticky mat), facing out. Roll up your sticky mat and set it beside the chair. Sit with your legs through the back of the chair and place your feet on the floor a few inches away from the wall. Slide your buttocks all the way to the back edge of the chair (toward the wall). Place your rolled sticky mat on the chair seat so that one end touches the back of your hips (against your sacrum). The sticky mat should be positioned lengthwise down the middle of the chair seat. Slowly lower your spine onto the rolled mat and adjust your position on the chair so that the bottom tips of your shoulder blades are in

line with the front edge of the chair. (If you have a longer torso, your pelvis may slightly hang off the back edge of the chair.) Finally, press the balls of your feet against the wall and straighten your legs.

From there, interlace your fingers underneath the rolled mat and place them behind your head. Hinge at the bottom tips of your shoulder blades, allowing your upper back to hang off the chair and arc into a backbend. Simultaneously root the

balls of your feet into the wall by lengthening through your thighs as you reach your upper arms and elbows toward the middle of the room. Depending on your comfort in the pose, you can stay anywhere from a few breaths to several minutes.

To come out of the pose, bend your knees and put your feet flat on the floor, place your elbows on the chair seat, and lift your torso up. Pause for a few breaths and enjoy the aftertaste of the pose.





## Bhujangasana

All backbends will ease open your spine and cultivate flexibility in your torso. But **Bhujangasana** (Cobra Pose) stands out because it allows you to strengthen and stretch the spine and torso without demanding flexibility in the shoulders and thighs.

When you do the pose, focus on lengthening your spine and observing the sensations in your back.

### Cobra Pose

To begin, lie on your belly and place your fingertips in line with the middle of your chest. Establish the basic foundations of the pose by rooting down through the top of your pinkie toes, the base of your fingers, and the pubic bone (this will help you lengthen your tailbone toward your heels). Slightly dome your lower abdomen away from the floor.

Initiate Bhujangasana by slowly peeling your forehead and chest away from the floor. As you begin to rise, create a “pulling” action by drawing your fingertips toward the wall behind you as you traction your spine and trunk forward. Complement this movement by reaching back through your legs strongly (avoid squeezing your glutes). As you continue to lengthen your body in opposite directions, draw your shoulder blades away from your ears and hug your elbows toward your sides.

From where you are, take a moment to observe the sensations in your back. Do your lower, middle, and upper back all have a similar quality of sensation? Are they all working a similar amount? Make subtle adjustments in your body until these regions feel harmonious.

Begin to intensify the pose by reaching back through your elbows. Continue to lengthen your spine upward and press the bottom tips of your shoulder blades against the back of your ribs. Lift the middle of your breastbone, widen your collarbones, and draw your chest forward. Breathe into your back. After 5 to 10 breaths, slowly lower your torso to the floor, keeping your spine long. Observe the sensations of your back as you appreciate the rise and fall of your breath.

# why we do backbends

*Whether they come naturally or not, backbends are well worth your effort.*

*Here are a few reasons why:*

### They stretch and strengthen

Backbends stretch the entire length of your front body and strengthen your back, arms, and legs. This adds up to better posture. The stress of sitting and of doing day-to-day tasks hunch you forward; when done well, backbends open the upper back and chest, and stabilize the shoulders so that your posture feels integrated.

### They help you breathe

Since backbends stretch your breathing apparatus—the diaphragm, the lungs, and the intercostal muscles between each rib—they can help you breathe deeper in daily life.

### They lift you up

Energetically, backbends are uplifting, stimulating poses. If your energy feels down or low, a backbend practice can shift your energy in a positive direction.

### They empower you

Backbends help you connect to the mysterious intricacies of your back body, an area that is usually neglected—out of sight, out of mind. Learning more about your body and its abilities is always confidence boosting. When you press up into your first Wheel or you balance in Scorpion Pose, you will undoubtedly feel empowered.

The key to enjoying all of these benefits is to seek a pose that suits your body—you’ll know you’ve succeeded if you feel clear, open, grounded, and pain free after practice.

## Downward-Facing Dog Pose



## Adho Mukha Svanasana, variation

This version of **Down Dog** will help unravel the tightness in your shoulders and upper back that can make straightening your elbows in Urdhva Dhanurasana difficult.

To begin, bring your sticky mat to a wall. Come onto all fours and place your forearms on your mat, shoulder-width apart. Place your hands on the

wall so that your fingers turn away from each other and your thumbs point to the ceiling. Notice how the combination of these actions rotates your arm bones externally. Root down through your forearms, lift your knees, and draw your body into Downward-Facing Dog.

Step your feet far enough away from your elbows that you can elongate through your shoulders. If your feet are too close to your elbows, you will feel boxed in, and your shoulders will press toward the wall. Instead, lengthen through your arms and make a single diagonal plane from your elbows to your hips. If you notice that the pose feels mild, walk your feet toward your elbows until you feel a thorough stretch. Make sure that your shoulders don't move toward the wall as you step in.

Now that you are positioned, focus on the actions of your upper body. Root down through your forearms and press your hands into the wall as you draw your shoulders away from the wall. Draw your hips upward toward the ceiling, and firm your thighs. Move the inner border of your shoulder blades away from your spine. If they narrow toward each other, you'll internally rotate your arms. But if you broaden, you'll get a much-needed stretch in your upper-back muscles. Without trying to change anything, observe the location and intensity of the stretch in your shoulders and arms. Breathe into the sides of your rib cage and feel your upper body expand. After 8 to 10 breaths, bring your knees to the floor and enjoy the ease of Balasana (Child's Pose).

# open your shoulders

Downward-Facing Dog and Chair Shoulder Stretch will prepare you to extend your arms overhead in Urdhva Dhanurasana by elongating key muscles in your shoulders, upper back, and arms.

These poses also extend your arms overhead while keeping your arm bones externally rotated. It's important to maintain external rotation when you do Urdhva Dhanurasana. If you're not open enough to get this action, you put yourself at risk for damaging the delicate muscles of your rotator cuff.

As you practice these poses, it's OK if your shoulders feel tight; begin where you are and notice the sensation of your arm bones externally rotating. Practice enjoying the process rather than trying to achieve an end goal.



## Chair Shoulder Stretch

The feeling of space and freedom in your shoulders that **Chair Shoulder Stretch** elicits makes rounding up the props well worth the time.

Place the back of a chair against a wall. Fold your sticky mat in quarters and set it on the chair seat. Place a blanket on the floor two to three feet in front of the chair. Kneel down, and place your elbows shoulder-width apart on the front edge of the seat (on the folded mat). Hold a block between the base of your palms to keep your hands separated. Slowly walk your knees away from the chair until they are on the folded blanket and your shoulders are parallel with the chair seat.

See that your pelvis and lower back are in neutral. Don't let the abdomen sink toward the floor, allowing too much curve in your lower back. Lengthen your tailbone and dome your abdomen so that the front rim of your pelvis is parallel to the floor.

Now that your pelvis and lower back are neutral, you will feel a stretch in your shoulders and arms. Deepen this sensation by rooting your elbows down into the chair and gently squeezing the block between your hands. Lengthen your elbows toward the wall and draw the inner border of your shoulder blades toward your tailbone. These actions are subtle and won't amount to much actual movement. They will, however, deepen the stretch and inform your body of the nuances of the pose.

Breathe into the sides of your rib cage and feel the expansiveness of your upper body. After 8 to 10 breaths, walk your knees toward the chair (keeping your elbows on the chair), and lift your shoulders away from the floor. Once all of your weight is off your shoulders, sit back on your heels and take your forearms off the chair.



## Urdhva Dhanurasana

Now you're ready to practice **Urdhva Dhanurasana** (Wheel or Upward Bow Pose) with more awareness and ease. To begin, lie back, bend your knees, and place your feet close to your hips. Bring your hands to the floor next to your ears, shoulder-width apart. Steady your breath. Inhale and lift onto the top of your head. Pause here, preparing the initial actions of the pose: Draw your elbows in toward the midline until they're parallel to each other, gently press the top of the head into the floor, engage your back muscles, and root down through the base of your big toes. Now that you're well aligned, lift up on an exhale by extending strongly through your arms and legs.

Bring your awareness to your thighs and hips, focusing on the actions that you developed in the preparatory poses. As you did in King Arthur's Pose and Bridge Pose, lengthen your hip flexors by drawing your tailbone toward the back of your knees. This movement—though difficult in the midst of Urdhva Dhanurasana—will help elongate your lower back and prevent it from compressing. Complement this work by gently spiraling your thighbones in (while keeping your thighs parallel) and rooting down through the four corners of each foot.

Next, shift your focus to your spine and torso. Remember, a healthy backbend is one in which the sensations are well distributed and you're playing your edge without overworking. Just as you did in Cobra Pose and Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana, notice if your lower, middle, and upper back each has a similar quality of sensation. Make small adjustments until your whole torso feels equally engaged.

Continue deepening your pose by re-creating the external rotation in the arm bones that you cultivated in the Down-Dog variation and the Chair Shoulder Stretch. Keep weight on the bases of your index fingers. Lengthen through your arms strongly and press your hands into the floor. Although this pose takes a fair amount of work, practice being nonaggressive. Cultivate patience and acceptance where you are as you wait for your body to open. Continue breathing deeply for 8 to 10 breaths before lowering to the floor. Take time to savor the sensations after the posture. ❀

## Upward Bow Pose



*Andrea Ferretti is Yoga Journal's deputy editor. Jason Crandell lives in San Francisco and teaches yoga around the world.*

