



Bhujangasana

Cobra pose

DIGNITY WITH HUMILITY. THIS ATTITUDE, THIS WAY OF BEING, IS ONE THAT WE SUGGEST TO OUR STUDENTS WHO ARE STUDYING TO BECOME YOGA TEACHERS. DIGNITY IS AN INNER AWARENESS OF OUR OWN DIVINITY. HUMILITY IS TO REMEMBER WHERE OUR POWER COMES FROM, AND TO HAVE REVERENCE TOWARDS ALL LIFE.

BY ADAM BORNSTEIN

In *Bhujangasana*, the Cobra pose, we fully embody humility as we lay ourselves down on the earth, and reaffirm our kinship with all beings, including those that crawl directly on the ground. Yet as we lift ourselves up in a beautiful arc that opens the heart and raises our sight, we embrace that divine yearning in all humans toward a higher reality.

Bhujanga translates as serpent, and as we practise the pose we can feel the whole body from the tips of the toes to the crown of the head like a cobra rising up in a graceful arc reaching towards the sky. In some yogic teachings, a coiled snake is used as a symbol for the *kundalini* energy lying dormant at the base of the spine. When this potential power is stimulated it moves upward awakening the chakras and uplifting consciousness. The backbending poses are some of the most powerful and transformative of all the asanas. If practised consistently and with care, their benefits can be clearly experienced in even the simplest variations. *Bhujangasana* is a pose that

can be approached by all levels of practitioners from the raw beginner to the advanced yogi. The benefits of Cobra range from improving posture to awakening an inner flow of life force (prana).

For many people in today's culture, day to day actions continuously round the lower back and move the shoulders and chin forward. Done repetitively, these movements can distort the natural curves of the spine. As a result, our chest collapses, inhibiting our breathing process. Strain is put on the soft tissues of the back and the cervical spine is pulled out of alignment causing tension and pain. This can also affect our mental/emotional outlook on life. We may close down our heart and our energy level may drop, losing our enthusiasm and joy. The Cobra pose, when practised consistently, offers an opportunity to shift this tendency into a new open-hearted posture and outlook on life.

Main Benefits

Bhujangasana is very helpful in counteracting any habitual distorting of the normal spinal

curves. The muscles along the spine are strengthened helping to support the spinal column. Posture is vastly improved as the shoulders roll back, the chest opens, and the neck elongates. A smile naturally arises as we open ourselves to this heart-felt posture.

Bhujangasana opens up the chest and ribcage deepening our breathing. Our body and brain are invigorated with this increased oxygen flow. As circulation improves, our cells are deeply nourished with oxygenated blood and cleansed of waste products.

Bhujangasana gently stimulates the kidney/adrenal area. There is a squeezing action (compressing) in this area as the backbend is held. When released the area is soaked with blood thereby influencing the organs to function at their optimal level.

Bhujangasana can powerfully assist us in dissolving negative tendencies such as lethargy and depression. Backbend practice helps us to develop willpower and inner strength to overcome obstacles in our lives. We learn to look our fears in the face and not shrink from them.

Bhujangasana recharges the body and mind with prana (life force/energy). The pose is excellent for awakening and increasing our awareness of the subtle energy in the spine. Once awakened this energy can be directed to flow upward through the central core of the spine.

Contraindications

Students with spondylolisthesis or spondylolysis should avoid this pose.

Students with recent abdominal surgery need to use common sense and consult a medical practitioner.

Care needs to be taken with spinal injuries and weak back muscles.

If your hip/groin area is very tight use a blanket (see instructions below).

Preparation

If you are a beginner to backbends, I recommend you go very slowly. Begin with easy variations to develop a foundational understanding of safe and effective practise. Approaching backbends in this progressive way will ensure that your practise is enjoyable and free of pain. In addition, by moving forward step by step, the body has the chance to acclimatise to the increased circulation and energy flow of *Bhujangasana*.

Opening the chest, shoulders, quadriceps, and psoas muscles are important preparatory measures to take before moving into the deeper variations of the pose. Practising Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) is an effective warm-up. I suggest doing 4 – 6 cycles of Sun Salutes without *Bhujangasana* and then once the body is warm and open, to include Cobra in the sequence. The preparation sequence included in this article is another way to prepare.

A technique that is very effective is to use the inhaling and exhaling breath to repeatedly move into and out of a pose before holding it. This will open the body along the pathways of the pose. Also, by flowing with the breath the mind becomes intimately linked with the body. This will powerfully increase the deeper benefits: self-integration, awareness of prana flow, and upliftment of consciousness.

The main area of concern in *Bhujangasana* is the lower back. It is important to be mindful of this potentially vulnerable spinal segment. The lumbar spine has the ability to bend forward (flexion) and backward (extension)

much easier than the thoracic spine which has large, downward facing spinous processes (the bones you can feel at the back of the spine) which inhibit extension. In addition, the 12 pairs of ribs attach to the thoracic vertebrae which add to the protection of the heart and lungs, but hinders flexibility. To avoid hyperextending the lumbar spine in backbends (and possibly causing strain and injury), it is important to focus on stabilising the lumbar spine and emphasise lengthening through the thoracic spine before beginning the back arch of backbends. As space is created between the vertebra in the thoracic spine, it is able to extend much easier. Keep in mind that you are looking for a smooth, consistent arc through the entire spine, and avoiding any hinge-like movements, especially in the lumbar area.

Preparation sequence for Bhujangasana

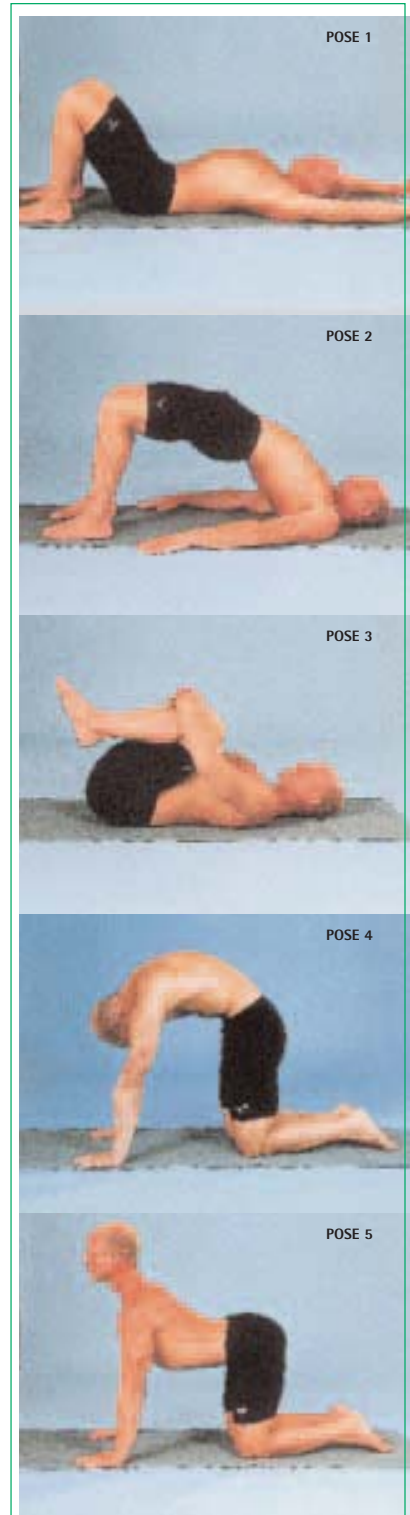
Centering: Begin by lying on the back, knees bent and feet on the floor. Lengthen through the back of neck and relax your arms open to the sides. Take a few minutes to breathe and centre yourself. Let go of any distractions, coming fully into the present moment.

Pelvic rocking: As you exhale, flatten the lumbar spine into the floor. On the inhale, gently lift the low back up pressing the sacrum into the floor. Move back and forth, exhaling lumbar down, inhaling sacrum down. Finish this flow by pressing lumbar down. This movement will convey warmth and awareness into the lower spine. Refer pose 1.

Rolling Bridge: From here press both feet evenly into the floor and inhaling slowly lift the pelvis up. Feel the action as if you are peeling the spine off the floor progressively up from sacrum to lumbar to thoracic until you feel the weight coming up on the shoulders. Make sure you keep the back of neck long, head on the floor, and the feet and knees hip-width apart. Now exhale and slowly roll the spine back down in reverse order. Repeat three to 10 times. This flow should feel wave-like and will assist in opening the chest and strengthening the back muscles. Refer pose 2.

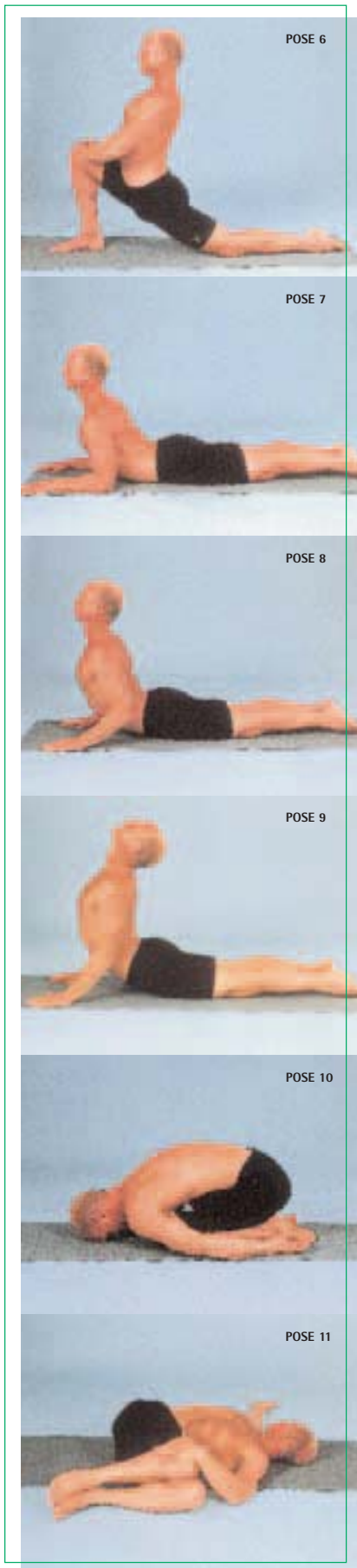
Knees to chest: As you exhale, press the lumbar spine into the floor and bring one knee at a time towards the chest. Use the hands to hug the knees in. Take a few breaths. This movement will lengthen the spinal muscles. Refer pose 3.

Cat/ Cow: Roll over to one side and press up onto hands and knees. Refer poses 4 & 5. Place



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your hands directly below shoulders and knees below hips (hips-width apart). As you exhale tuck the tailbone under, press hands down lifting shoulderblades, and move your chin towards the chest. As you inhale, press the sitting bones directly back. Feel them anchored there as you lengthen through the spine drawing your breastbone forward through the arms. Do not lift the head (compressing cervical spine) in this position. Let the head follow the movement of the rest of the spine. Repeat this flow three to 10 times. Rest back the buttocks on the heels, lengthen your spine over the legs, and rest your head on the floor or the back of your forearms (Child pose). This is an excellent prep for Bhujangasana, especially the inhaling movement (Cow pose). Be sure to lengthen through the lumbar and broaden your shoulders as you press breastbone forward.

- *Lunge*: Press up to a kneeling position on the knees, shins, and tops of feet. Place your hands on the sides of the pelvis and step the right foot forward. Place your hands on the front knee and inhaling come up onto the rear leg shin. The front leg will be moving towards being straight. Draw the tailbone long and exhale move the pelvis forward into this variation of lunge. Make sure the front foot is on the floor, heel included. Ideally the front shin is vertical here. Inhale back up onto back shin and again exhale forward into lunge. Be sure there is adequate padding under back knee. Breathe here three to 10 breaths. Repeat entire lunge sequence on other side. The lunges are effective for lengthening the quadriceps and iliopsoas muscles. The psoas connects the lumbar spine to the femur (thigh bone) and if it is too tight will put strain on the lumbar as we practise backbends. *Refer pose 6.*

BHUJANGASANA VARIATIONS

Let's look at three different *Bhujangasana* variations. I recommend beginning with the first one until you are ready to progress further. If you have a weak lower back or your groins/psoas is tight, fold a blanket into a rectangle and place it on the floor above the navel. Lay down on the blanket with the blanket under the abdomen and pelvis, but not the thighs. This will take some of the pressure out of the lumbar spine as you ascend into Cobra.

It is very effective to visualise the spine like a magnet drawing in prana. Each inhale takes the energy upward through the chakras to the spiritual eye (Ajna chakra) and each exhale moves energy down to the base of the spine.

Feel your heart centre as a receptacle being filled with vibrant illuminating energy.

COBRA 1

Begin by lying on your frontside, forehead down, with legs hips-width apart, and arms resting by your sides. Place the palms down by your hips.

As you exhale flatten the front of the pelvis into the floor and stretch back through the legs and out through the toes. Feel the tailbone lengthening towards the heels and a subtle pull of the pubic bone (pubis) up towards the navel.

As you inhale press the palms down and lift the chest and head up together a few centimetres away from the floor. Do not lift the head first! Let the upper back muscles lift you, not the neck muscles. Keep neck in line with the spine.

On an exhale lower back down to the floor. Repeat three to seven times.

On your next inhale come up and slide your hands around your sides and bring the forearms alongside the chest with the palms on the floor and fingers facing forward.

Press the forearms and palms down, stretch back through the legs and feet, and draw the breastbone forward.

Broaden the shoulders, pull back on the hands and allow your heart to blossom forward and up towards the sky. If your chest becomes vertical your gaze will most likely be parallel to the horizon line. If your chest is not vertical, you will be looking towards the floor.

Stay here and breathe, feeling your heart opening with each incoming breath. As you exhale feel a current move down your backside through the heels to the toes. Come down and rest when you need to. Stay connected and feel the after-effects. *Refer pose 7.*

COBRA 2

In this variation, begin as you did for the first Cobra except have your hands on the floor alongside the chest, with your elbows facing up.

Spread your fingers apart with the middle finger facing forward. Draw the elbows in alongside the ribcage. As you exhale press the pelvis towards the floor and lengthen back through the tailbone, legs, and feet.

As you inhale slowly begin lifting the chest and head together off the floor. Once the chest

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comes up off the floor begin utilising the hands to pull back on the floor to facilitate moving the chest forward. Feel where the central abdominal muscles (rectus abdominis) attaches to the pubis pulling up towards the chest. The entire frontside of the torso lengthening from that point, up through the belly, the ribs, culminating at the middle breastbone.

Broaden the shoulders side to side and away from the ears. Keep the elbows close to the ribcage and the heart leading the way.

Relax the jaw and facial muscles and feel internally a lengthening from the pelvic floor to the roof of the mouth. The cervical spine remains long and natural.

Breathe and experience the energy flowing up and down the spine as you inhale and exhale.

If your chest is vertical, you can release the head back, drawing the rising energy into the *Ajna* chakra.

Come down slowly and carefully and rest. Press back into Child pose. *Refer photo 8.*

COBRA 3

Follow all the instructions for Cobra 2.

Take note of how your spine feels. If your back arc feels even and consistent with no pinching in the lumbar spine you can continue energetically pulling back on the hands to facilitate broadening the chest and moving breastbone forward.

From here press the hands down into the floor, beginning to straighten the arms.

Remember to continually move the heart forward and feel the chest begin to expand upward. Keep the shoulders away from the ears and very broad side to side.

As you exhale keep pressing back with the legs and feet, as you inhale the breastbone continues to lift.

Breathe, concentrating the flow of prana into the magnetised spine.

If your chest is vertical you can release the head back, lifting your gaze skyward.

Slowly come down and press back into Child pose for a few breaths. *Refer pose 9.*

THREE PARTS TO AN ASANA

Each asana has three parts: Creation (moving into the pose), Preservation (being in the pose), and Dissolution (undoing the pose). An aspect of creating the pose is applying sequences to prepare the body/mind to maximise the benefits and to provide safety. Then when we are 'being' in the asana, we are already attuned to our unique self and applying the twin principles from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras of *sthira* (steadiness, stability) and *sukha* (comfort, lightness). Creating the asana also has to do with how we move into the pose. Ideally we are moving in unity, with the breath as the bridge connecting the mind with the body. Listening to the internal messages our body is conveying as we move into a position will give us the essential feedback to know how deeply to go. Thus, self-awareness is enhanced and ideally we will be always working in harmony with our self. While we are being in the pose, the breath keeps us intimately connected to what is happening in the here and now. Our inner feedback indicates to us whether we should subtly adjust our pose for stability and/or lightness and also will tell us when to exit out of the position. The undoing aspect has to do with how we come out of the asana. Are we collapsing out of the pose because of fatigue or boredom? Or are we coming out smoothly and consciously? Each aspect, moving into, preserving, and undoing the pose are equally important and ideally are seen as a continuum

COUNTERPOSES

Another aspect of the undoing of the posture is the need for counterposes to bring the body, mind, and prana flow back to neutral. Intense backbends do need some counterposes. Mild variations may only need a short pause to feel the

effects before moving on. Listed below is a brief counterposing sequence for *Bhujangasana*:

Balasana (Child pose): After practising the Cobra, exhaling slowly lower down the chest and forehead to the floor. Then press the hands down and move the buttocks back towards the heels. Lay your belly and chest over the thighs with your forehead either on the floor or resting on the back of the forearms. Stay here and breathe, feeling the back muscles relax. *Refer pose 10.*

Jathara Parivartanasana (Supine Twist pose): Lying on the back with knees into chest, and arms open out to the sides at shoulder level. Exhale and lower the legs to the left, rolling to outer left hip. Keep the knees bent with the left hand on right knee. If the angle between your torso and the thighs is 90 degrees or less you may straighten the legs, knees and feet together. Draw the top hip down and away from the shoulders to lengthen the spine and either place your left hand on the feet or on the top knee. Breathe and enjoy, feeling the spine release. *Refer pose 11.*

Bhujangasana is an excellent asana in which to explore both self-effort and surrender. It does take strong focus and will to press up into the pose and draw the heart forward. But, if this is the sole approach to our yoga exploration, we will be missing out on the deepest and most profound benefits. When we bring surrender into our practise, we shift from being only physically oriented into a more wholistic perspective. Our mind, instead of grasping for an external ideal, becomes more spacious and light, and we open to receive the pose. We engage our self-effort to move towards *Bhujangasana* while internally sensing and listening to the body's messages. From this self-attunement we can subtly adjust our asana, perhaps staying where we are or turning up the juice. This progressive 'inner listening' mode of practise will ultimately and safely take you deeper. I like to see the practise of an asana like a wave in the ocean. Rising up out of the smooth steady oceanic surface into a rising swell, slowly building upwards, still embodying the sea's essence, then gradually releasing back into the powerful stillness of the deep ocean. You can see your whole practise this way: From the first breath you take, through asana practise and into the final relaxation of *Savasana* (Corpse pose); the waves of action melting into the deep serenity of your sacred Self within.