

# Dharma Yoga

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## **Backbends by Sri Dharma Mittra** **New York Yoga Magazine, February 2007**

Dharma Mittra has been teaching in NYC since 1967. In the teachings of Hatha Yoga or the 3<sup>rd</sup> limb of Yoga, the practice of backbends is often the most pleasing, and the most beneficial. The movements found in backbends are not usually done in regular life activities, sports, or other different forms of physical exercise. When practicing backbends move in a conscious, slow and graceful manner. During your yoga practice, try to regulate and slow down your breath, so that you can start to bring your attention away from the noisy and restless world.

Editor's note: In all backbends, increase the stretch on the inhalation and relax into it on the exhalation. There is a much higher reason of why we do backbends. They are the hardest postures in yoga, and on another level they are the hardest postures in life. Whenever you bend backwards in life, it is always for someone else. It is the most unselfish act you can perform. When you bend backwards in yoga, you should be away of the last time you bent backwards for someone in life, or maybe you didn't and you are holding onto this causing an energy blockage. Just let it go and have fun.

### **Cobra** *(Bhujangasana)*

The first posture I would recommend is the Cobra (Bhujangasana). Not only can everyone do this pose, but they can feel its value immediately. I have never met a person who does not enjoy this pose. It aids in opening the chest, and brings great flexibility to the spine. This posture is healing for any slight spinal displacements, and brings radiant health to the kidneys and internal organs. Practice of this pose replaces the spinal discs in their original position. I always recommend it just before bedtime for those who have trouble sleeping. To begin, lie flat, belly downwards with your chin in and your forehead on the floor. Extending gently downward thru the legs, keeping the heels together, if possible, and the feet and toes lengthened. Now bend your elbows and place your palms flat on the floor by the side of the chest region (they may be either just under the shoulders or 3 or 4 inches below). Now please as you inhale slowly thru your nose, also lead with your nose and then with your chin as your spine gradually arches away from the floor. Beginners should not push too much, and only go up till the point before any discomfort. Those more flexible may continue to go up higher by pressing the palms firmly against the floor as you slowly lift the body up by continuing to arch the head and spine back. The



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pubis bone should be in contact with the floor with the weight on the legs and palms. By assuming this pose the correct muscles will contact naturally. You do not have to do anything extra. Maintain the posture for up to 20 seconds, breathing normally (3 to 4 breaths). To come down slowly exhale, bending the elbows and gradually bring the chest back onto the floor. Relax for 3 to 4 breaths and you then may repeat the pose two or three times.

- The Regular practice of this pose will bring you confidence and courage.
- After doing the pose a few times, pull back in child pose to rest the back completely.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Relax your shoulders, they should be back and down.

## **Backward Boat**

*(Poorva Navasana)*

Once the student can comfortably perform the Cobra pose, they may move on to the Backward Boat (Poorva Navasana). In this pose, the spine is stretched backwards and becomes more supple. The lower half of the body is developed, in that the back, leg and the buttock muscles are all toned as well as the abdominals. The boat pose increases the blood supply to the liver, pancreas and kidneys. It aids in stimulating the digestive glands and relieves gastric troubles. The bladder and prostate gland also benefit from this exercise and remain healthy. To begin, lay full length on your stomach on the floor. Now stretch your arms back and keep the palms separated, facing either up or down towards the legs. Inhale and lift the head, chest and legs off the floor simultaneously as high as possible. The arms should be lifted and reaching toward the feet. Only the abdominal front portion of the body will be resting on the floor and bearing the weight of the body. The buttock muscles will naturally contract as will the hamstrings and calves, and the front thigh muscles will stretch. Try to keep both legs fully extended, including the knees (as much as possible). If you only hold the pose for only 5 seconds or so, you should hold the breath. If you are holding the pose longer then breathe naturally for 4 to 5 breaths. Release the slowly as you lower the limbs and head down. Rest with one cheek on the floor for 3 to 4 breaths. You may then repeat the pose two or three times followed by a longer rest time.

- The regular practice of this pose will bring one radiant digestive health.
- Concentration should be on the lower back during the pose. Stretch out your back muscles by rounding into the child pose, making fists and vigorously tapping out your lower back.



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## **Camel**

*(Ustrasana)*

Another wonderful and too difficult backbend is the Camel (Ustrasana) pose. This is a great antidote for kyphosis. The entire spine is stretched back and is toned. This pose can be achieved by the elderly and even by persons with spinal injury. It is good to have a soft blanket under you. Kneel on the floor, keeping the thighs and feet in line, toes pointing back and resting on the floor. Place your palms on the hips, stretching the thighs, inhale and begin to curve the spine back gradually and extend the ribs up and forward. Now exhale, place the right palm over the right heel and the left palm over the left heel, and if possible, place the palms on the soles of the feet (you may also grab the ankles instead). Push the spine towards the thighs, which should be kept perpendicular to the floor. When the buttocks contract, it will help stretch the dorsal (lower back) and the coccyx regions of the spine. While maintaining the pose, try to keep the neck long as it stretches back. Remain in the posture for about 15-30 seconds, breathing normally.

Come up slowly, releasing the hands one by one and rest them on the hips. Sit back and then slowly round the body forward resting the top of the head on the floor in the child pose (Balasana). Relax for 3 to 4 breaths and then round up slowly sitting. You should repeat this pose 2 to 3 times. This is a good alternate pose for pregnant women, instead of doing cobra.

- The Regular practice of this pose will bring you respiratory health.
- Rest quietly in child pose to release all tension from the lower back.

## Upward Facing Bow- The Wheel (Urdhva Dhanurasana)

Once a good amount of flexibility and health has been brought to the body, the student may begin to practice the Upward Facing Bow (Urdhva Dhanurasana) pose. Urdhva means upwards, and Dhanu means a bow. This posture tones the spine by stretching it fully, and keeps the body alert and supple. It strengthens the shoulders, arms and wrists, and gives one great vitality and life affirming energy. In this posture the body is fully arched (to the full extent of the students ability), and supported by the hands and soles of the feet. To begin, lie with your back on the floor. Raise your arms and bending the elbows over the head, place the palms of your hands under the shoulders with the fingers facing the toes. Now bend your knees and place the feet flat on the floor under them. Take a short breath in, exhale



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as you raise your chest and begin to roll the head back until you can rest the crown of your head on the floor. Now take another moment and adjust your hands if you need to and, take a deep breath in, as you exhale lift the trunk and head and arch the back so that its weight is on your hands and feet. Stretch the arms from the shoulder until the elbows are straightened (as much as possible), at the same time raise your chest and abdomen fully and stretch thru the thigh muscles. Breathe normally as you maintain the pose for 20-30 seconds. Once you get more comfortable in this pose you may rock your chest gently over the hands to open the chest, shoulders, and back more. On an exhalation, slowly lower the body to the floor by bending the knees and elbows, and tucking your head in. Rest

- The Regular practice of this post will bring one youthful vitality and great physical stamina.
- Bring your knees into your chest and rock gently, forward and back, and side to side to relieve your back muscles.

Sri Yogi Dharma Mittra, since 1967 continues to teach daily in NYC. He is known as the “Rock of Yoga” and the “Teacher’s Teacher”. Dharma currently conducts Dharma Mittra Yoga Life of a Yogi Teacher Certification and Workshops globally. His Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures adorns the walls of all Yoga Schools, even those in India. He is the author of “608 Yoga Poses”, and “Maha Sadhana DVD’s Level I & II.”

Visit: [www.dharmayogacenter.com](http://www.dharmayogacenter.com). Dharma Yoga Center is located at 297 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave @ 23<sup>rd</sup> St., NYC

