

Ustrasana

camel pose

by Peter Scott

Daily life has most people bending forwards and very little of life leads us to bend backwards. This puts pressure and heaviness onto our inner organs and diaphragm, leading to overwork and tension whereas backbends open the chest and abdomen decreasing internal pressures and allowing deeper breathing and improved circulation. Our posture is improved with regular practise of backbends, which are also uplifting.

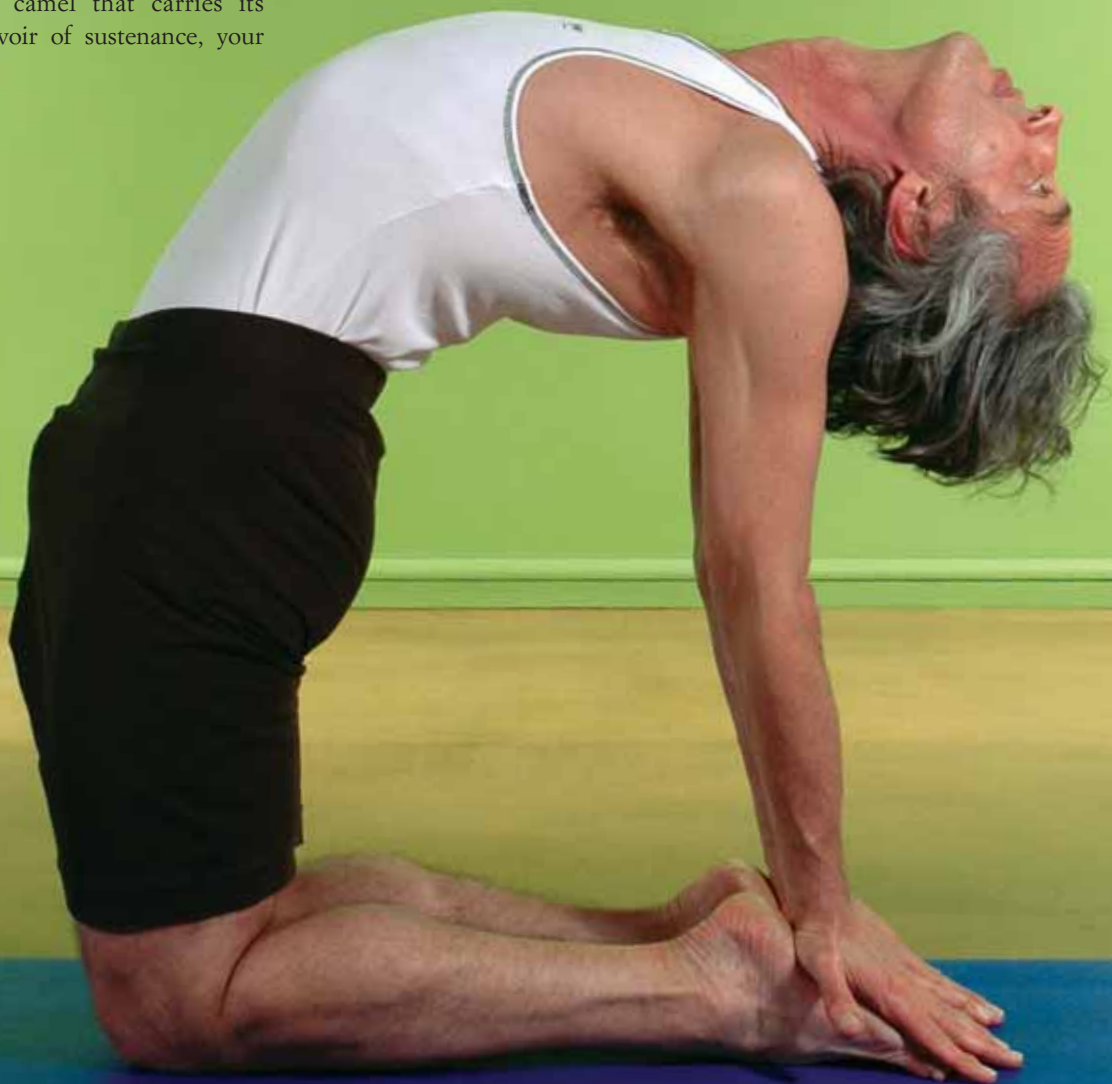
Ustrasana (Camel pose) – is named due to the hump-like appearance of the chest.

Like the camel that carries its constant reservoir of sustenance, your

energy reserves will be bolstered by the inclusion of Ustrasana into your yoga practice.

Ustrasana is an introductory back bending asana that teaches us to go against gravity.

Thus it strengthens our nervous system and builds courage. Classically, Ustrasana was taught with the legs together, now however, this is considered the advanced version of the pose.



*In asanas we are
with four bodies.*

BKS IYENGAR

[Method of practice]

Technique

Kneel on the yoga mat with the knees, thighs, and feet all hip-width and place the hands on the back of the hips. Only take the legs to hip-width, for any wider creates a braced position. Then the action of the inner legs is misplaced and the outer hips will drop into the space around the lowest lumbar vertebrae (L5).

Foundation:

Hold the feet straight in line with the shins so that you are directly on the median line of the top of each foot. Broaden the soles and press down the outer edges of the feet. Harden the calves down and stretch them towards the heels. Hold this stretch strongly and press vertically down all along the midline of the lower legs. The shins grip down as if they are in a vice.

Preparation

Balance on the centre of the knees; don't fall onto the outer or inner knees. Hold the thighs perpendicular to floor with the inner thighs well lifted before pressing the thighs back. This backward pressing action is challenged by a forward grip of the tailbone. These two actions must hold in a strong challenge so the lower back is not dropped nor compressed.

Actively engage the thigh muscles so they are lifted from the knees to the hips on all sides – front, inner, and outer. Harden the back of the thighs and stretch them up to the buttocks, so you can broaden the crease at the top of the back of the leg, then 'plug' the outer head of the thighs (trochanters) into the body. Press the actively lifted thighs to the ground to initiate the lift of the pelvis. Rotate the outer hips forwards (approximately half to one centimeter each) and in that way broaden the sacrum.

Upakrama (going into the pose)

With the hands, press the buttocks from back to front. Ensure that the tailbone is well pressed in, lift the front of the torso and stretch the spine backwards so you can place the palms on the soles of the feet.

Sthiti (being in the pose)

At first, keep the head up and not extended back. Hold the thighs at a perpendicular angle. Stretch the lower back ribs away from the pelvis making space and stretch the upper back (dorsal or thoracic) spine towards the head.

Engage the upper arm muscles so the arms are straight, true, and strong. Then grip the outer edges of the upper arms (triceps) into the bones (humerus).

Press from the shoulders down to the palms to ensure the space between the shoulder blades remains strong and broad and doesn't drop and become heavy. Press the shoulder blades into the back of the chest to support the upper back to allow it to lengthen more than extend the head back.

Make sure the collarbones hold their breadth as you take the head back, by stretching the interior edges of the collarbones out from the breastbone (sternum) to the shoulders. This will help to keep you from sagging the neck when stretching the head back. Stay in this pose from 30 seconds to a minute, breathing through the nose.

Upasmvhaba

(coming out of the pose)

When coming out from the pose reverse the method of going in, except bring the head up last. Place the hands onto the buttocks, inhale and lift the spine up by pressing the hands into the hips. Stretch the front of the abdomen and chest back towards the thighs – like a slinky toy curving down the stairs.

Sit into Virasana (Hero pose) and slowly stretch forward into Adho Mukha Virasana (Downward facing hero pose) with active arms.

[Modifications and props for Ustrasana]

Primarily Ustrasana requires an extended spine. It is important not to slump, fall or drop back so that the vertebral spaces are impinged upon. Hence, it is important to keep the space of the lower back and neck as open as possible.

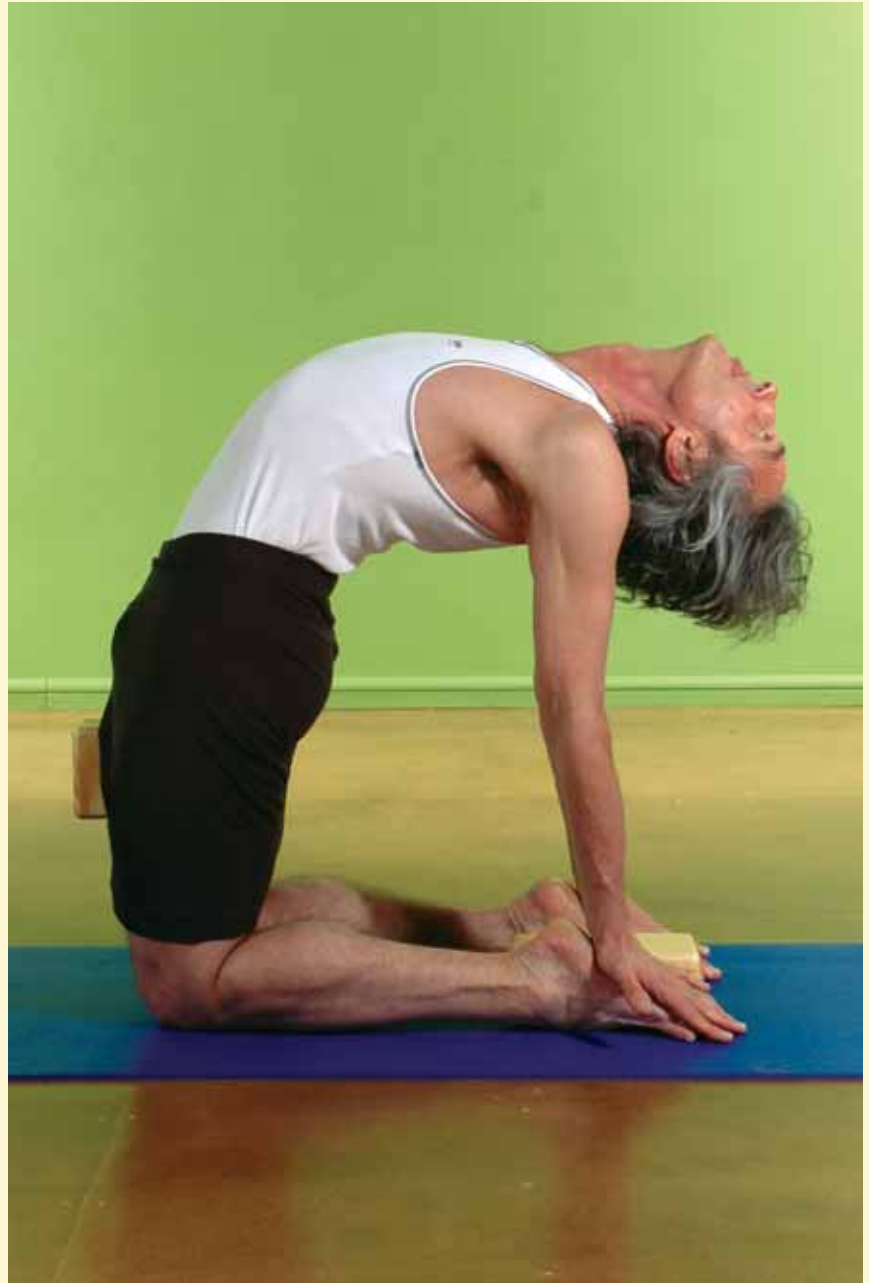
[Benefits]

- Ustrasana is the first backbend learnt that really defies gravity, it opens the front of the trunk, so primarily it works on the chest while it stretches the back and tones the spine.
- Respiration and circulation are stimulated, building reserves of energy.
- Works with the kidneys, adrenals, and pancreas.
- Builds immunity by enhancing infection resistance.
- Builds strength and removes stiffness in the joints of the legs and back.
- Helps to regulate menstrual flow and relieve abdominal cramps.

[Contraindications and cautions]

- Headaches and migraine
- High or low blood pressure
- Eye conditions (conjunctivitis etc.)
- Lower back or neck injuries
- Rheumatoid arthritis or osteoarthritis of the knees
- Severe constipation or diarrhoea
- Insomnia
- Menstruation, pregnancy

[How to work with lower back stiffness]



1. Block(s)

To assist the action of bending back against gravity, place a block between the feet and inner upper thighs. This support is given to stop the hips dropping. After pressing the little toe knuckle (metatarsal) down to the ground

grip the big toes and big toe knuckles firmly to the block. Hold the thigh block gently but firmly squeezing the outer thighs inwards and lift the inner thighs where the block sits. Then follow the instructions on the previous page.

[Higher support for lower back stiffness]**1. Bolster on the heels (Photo A)**

Place a bolster on the heels so as to increase the height of the support. Follow the Techniques given above. Then press the hands on the bolster.

2. Blocks beside the feet

An alternative (that is not as steady) is to place blocks one each side of the feet and press the hands on the blocks. The advantage here is the blocks are a little lower.

3. Hold a column (Photo B)

Kneel in front of a small column and press the thighs firmly against the column, otherwise follow the instructions in Method of Practice.

4. Turn the toes forward and under to elevate the heels.**5. Use a chair for complete support (Photo C)**

Kneel with the lower legs under the chair as shown and follow the techniques given.

Like the camel that carries its constant reservoir of sustenance, your energy reserves will be bolstered by the inclusion of Ustrasana into your yoga practice.

Preparatory or preceding poses

Each of the following asanas can be used to prepare students learning Ustrasana:

- Utkatasana (Chair pose)
- Parighasana (Gate pose)
- Virasana (Hero pose)
- Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Downward facing dog pose)
- Chatuspadasana (Full arm plank pose)
- Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge pose) from the floor.

Whereas Supta Virasana (Reclining hero pose) and Bhujangasana (Cobra pose) are used as preparations for intermediate students

Subsequent or ensuing poses

When first learning the pose, follow Ustrasana with Adho Mukha Virasana to stretch and lengthen the spine. For students that practice Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand), Ustrasana is an excellent lead-in pose as it removes stiffness in the shoulders and allows students to gain access to being upright in Salamba Sarvangasana. For more advanced students Ustrasana can be

practiced immediately before Sirsasana (Headstand) so that access and grip can be taught to the shoulder blades. While in a stronger practice, Ustrasana is a wonderful preparation for Urdhva Dhanurasana (Wheel Pose).

Peter Scott is a senior Iyengar teacher. He started teaching in 1982. Peter teaches at Yoga Jivana which is run by his wife Sue Scott, also an Iyengar teacher. Peter can be contacted at www.yogajivana.com.au

Peter thanks his teachers Guruji BKS Iyengar and Geetaji Dr. Geeta Iyengar for their teaching, encouragement and support.