

Bhujangasana (Cobra)

Pronounced bhoo-juhn-gaah-suh-nuh the word bhujanga means snake or serpent in Sanskrit.



This pose is one of the most basic backbends although there are many variations we can perform, some of them being very gentle and others very challenging indeed. For this posture we can imagine we are like a snake where our pubic bone is grounded against the floor and just like a snake uses muscular effort to rise out of the floor, we too rise out of the ground lifting and lengthening the spine.

Teaching Points:

Stage 1: sphinx pose

- Lie in a prone position, legs hip width apart, toes pointing behind
- Place elbows beneath shoulders, forearms to the floor
- Keep spine long, including the neck as extend along the spine; draw shoulderblades down and together, shoulders down from ears, opening the chest; can stay here

Stage 2: hands beneath shoulders

- Keep elbows tucked into the sides of the body, shoulders down away from ears.
- Press the pubic bone down into the floor, keeping both legs active.
- Inhaling, engage the core/mula bandha
- Lift the chest forwards and upwards, keeping your neck long and open, the spine elongated
- Feel the backbend coming from the lift of your chest, rotating shoulders backwards, shoulderblades sliding together and down the back
- The pelvis stays to the floor
- Do not rely upon the strength of the arms rather also utilize the muscles of the front and back of the body, and in the full pose **both arms will remain slightly bent** so we are not simply hanging off straight arms.
- Exhaling deepen the sense of the backbend, lifting the chest, opening shoulders, keeping facing forwards, neck long
- If there is any compression at the lower back can try tucking the tailbone underneath to see if that helps to give more space in the spine

Stage 3

- Hands placed either side of the lower ribcage
- As above for stage 3
- If there is enough experience, and strength in the neck and shoulder muscles can lower the head back, feeling a stretch across the throat, otherwise keep looking forwards, in either position the neck keeps its length

Exiting for all stages:

- Exiting on an exhale, feeling all the muscles being released as we lower down.

Drishti point: Be aware of the space between the eyebrows, ajna chakra

Note: the position of the hands alters the depth of the backbend, where the closer hands are to the waist the deeper and more intense the backbend can be.

Benefits:

- ✓ Strengthens & stretches the back
- ✓ Opens chest & shoulders
- ✓ Increases circulation within lungs & abdomen

- ✓ Tones visceral organs & improves digestion
- ✓ Strengthens abdominal muscles
- ✓ Gives energy to lower body
- ✓ Creates feeling of openness
- ✓ Counteracts low energy states
- ✓ Softer options can help to alleviate back pain & sciatica

Good preparation

Back strengtheners, ankle mobilisers, chest openers, shoulder mobilisers, spinal mobilisers (esp. twists)

Important teaching notes

Students must learn that to avoid compressing the lumbar area of the spine, which is a natural 'v' shape, we must maintain the extension through the whole length of the spinal column rather than directing the back bend purely into the lumbar region; this includes the neck where we must not overly compress the cervical vertebrae by lifting the chin, it being much better to keep the neck long and in a neutral position at first. Remember how this placement of the neck engages the hyoid bone which in turn engages the muscles along the front of the body supporting the back, something students might like to explore. Later we may wish to allow the head to drop when our neck muscles are strong and mobile enough.

Students will ultimately experience the limitations of the posture at the front of the body rather than at the back of the body.

Cautions & possible modifications

- For back conditions such as disc injuries, sacroiliac problems and sciatica, gentle backbends are generally therapeutic but we must offer gentler versions when the rest of the class is working more intensely e.g. sphinx, low cobra
- For spondylosis, where the discs have degenerated or thinned, then backbends can aggravate the condition so we must proceed carefully
- Abdominal conditions: softer versions or an alternative such as majrasana (cat) or hamsa (seated swan).
- For pregnancy: alternative such as majrasana (cat) or hamsa (seated swan); note pregnancy must avoid deep backbends focusing on opening chest and shoulders.
- For headaches, heart conditions or unmedicated high blood pressure: softer versions, rest as needed
- If hip bones dig into the ground we can also place some padding underneath this area.

Note: a great modification for some students is where a rolled mat or blanket is placed beneath the pelvis because this can help to ensure the lower back is kept lengthened.

Simple versions and modifications

It is often best to begin the journey into the cobra by working with the softer modifications where we are encouraged to lift the chest and extend the back *without the use of arms*. This means the back and abdominal muscles will be the primary muscles used and by lifting without arms we are awakening & bringing our attention to these muscles. When we do use the arms to aid the lift we must remember *not to use the arm muscles as the primary force* since this would mean we are simply pushing into the lower back or hanging off the shoulders.



Sarpasana (serpent)



We can perform this version of cobra which helps to draw back shoulders and open the chest. It also helps us to really engage the muscles of the front and the back of the torso.

Sphinx

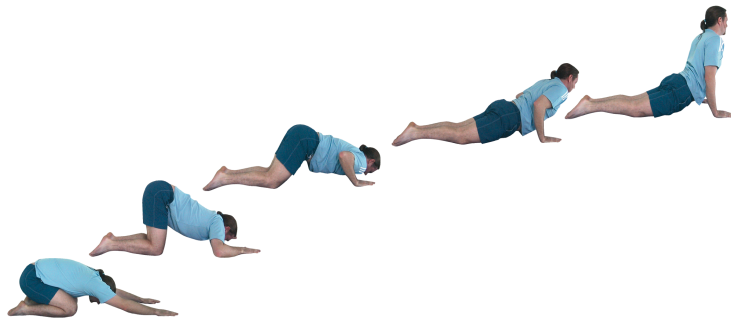
This is an extremely useful version of bhujangasana that can be used whenever a student requires a softer version. Here elbows are placed beneath shoulders with forearms to the floor so that the backbend is diminished. Students can as always see if the tailbone dropping downwards helps keep the spine more open.



Developments & Variations

Tiryaka bhugansana

Striking cobra



To work with striking cobra we follow the poses as illustrated. We must keep the elbows tucked in against the body and the buttocks are raised until we slide the chest between the hands, planting the hips as the legs are straightened, rising up into cobra.



Head turning cobra

Here we move into cobra then as we exhale, keeping the chin parallel to the floor, we turn the head to one side, inhaling to centre and exhaling we turn the head in the opposite direction.

Cobra twist

We can make this turning movement more intense by moving into a gentle twist.

Legs raised cobra

We can make cobra more intense by bending both knees and pointing the toes of both feet towards the ceiling or even if flexible enough, take the feet to the back of the head. However this variation is contraindicated for most students because most students have structural limitations to make this pose an impossibility without overly compressing the spinal column. Remember we must always ensure students become aware of where the resistance is, for this pose if it is experienced within the back of the body then bone has met bone.

Adjustments

To assist students into cobra we often have to lessen the intensity of the pose, especially if when asked the student indicates they can feel discomfort within the lower back.

We can lightly touch feet if they are not aligned with the front of foot to the floor.

We may also place a hand lightly upon the back of the neck drawing the hand lightly up the neck to encourage students to lengthen the neck.

We can place a hand beneath thoracic spine to encourage a lift into the hand. No pressure exerted.

Can place hands on top of shoulders or smooth around from upper chest over shoulders to encourage external rotation of shoulders.