

## Matsyasana (fish pose)

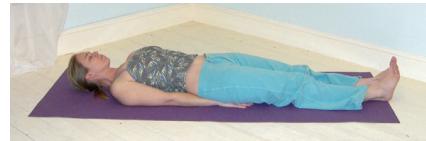
*Pronounced muht-see-yaah-suh-nuh the word matsya means fish in Sanskrit.*

This pose is a supine backbend where we must be very mindful of the neck which can be very vulnerable in this pose. We also of course need to keep the lumbar spine free from adverse compression. There are two main versions we can practice that vary primarily according to the way we enter and leave the pose.



### Teaching Points:

- Start by lying supine, place hands, palms down to the floor beneath the buttocks
- Make both legs active, pointing toes to the ceiling
- When ready gently press downwards into elbows, forearms and hands as you look behind, raising the chest and roll over onto the top of the head. Ensure the lower back remains comfortable.
- **At no time does the head actually lift from the floor**, and we need to ensure that we do not look around i.e. twist at the neck.
- Stay here lifting up out of the lower back, expanding and lifting the chest as the shoulders are drawn backwards into external rotation, squeeze the shoulderblades together and down towards the waist. Keep the buttocks to the floor and the legs actively contracted by pressing the inner edge of the legs together. Toes to ceiling.
- Note that the neck remains comfortable with a feeling of length and also that the lower back feel open. If any discomfort is experienced in either area then lower down and ease out – practicing an alternative such as setu bandhasana, bridge pose or lying over a bolster/blocks & blanket
- **To release from the pose simply slowly look downwards** as you lower down, again keeping the head to the floor at all times



**Note:** This version is excellent as a way of practicing matsyasana because it will keep the head & neck supported throughout. It is interesting to note that initially students are likely to experience a significantly restricted breath and will be forced to breathe primarily within the abdominal region but as the back and shoulders become more flexible then they will find they can breathe more deeply into the diaphragmatic and thoracic regions.

**Drishti point:** Be aware of the heart centre or the third eye

### Benefits:

Breaks up tension in the neck, shoulders and spine  
Strengthens the back and neck  
Frees ribcage, promoting deep breathing  
Alleviates respiratory conditions

Stimulates blood flow to the neck and the brain  
Aids digestion  
Enlivens the abdominal organs

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### Good preparation:

Simple twists and simple backbends, shoulder mobilisers, chest openers, back strengtheners

### Cautions:

- Prohibited for those who have suffered neck trauma
- Prohibited for those with severe back problems e.g. herniated discs & ankylosis spondylitis (inflammation of the spinal joints leading to stiffness or fusing of vertebrae) or significant kyphosis
- Prohibited for pregnancy
- Prohibited for unmedicated high blood pressure and heart conditions as head is lower than heart, and diseases of the eyes, ears etc. where increased internal pressure is problematic
- Take care for weak necks and backs

### Simple versions and modifications



#### ***Lie over a bolster or rolled blankets/mats***

This simple version really helps to open the chest and shoulders and if necessary some extra padding can be placed behind the head.



#### ***Lie over padding and raise arms overhead***

This version can accentuate the work done within the shoulders.

### Developments & Variations:



#### ***Place hands in prayer position***

If working in version one as above, once comfortable in the pose we take hands from the floor and take them into prayer pose



***Hands reaching behind*** To go a little deeper it feels great to reach behind.

**Note:** for both of these developments we must return the hand to the floor and lower by rolling onto the back of the head as we look downwards

#### ***Lifting head from the ground***

If the body is strong and flexible enough, with a deep enough backbend, it is possible to lift the head from the ground as we lift onto forearms. To exit however we need to lower down the way we lifted, returning the top of the head to the ground, then looking down returning to the back of the head.

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### ***Cross-legged***

We can work into matsyasana with crossed legs, and traditionally many schools of yoga have fish with lotus legs as their classical form. Here as before, if appropriate, we can work with the crown of the head upon the ground.

### ***Legs raised***

A much more challenging development we sometimes see is to lift both legs (and sometimes both arms) although this is **prohibited for use in general classes** because double leg raises can very easily create stress and potential strain within the lower back & also the abdominal and pelvic region. If you remember this is because the hip flexors for both legs insert close to the femur head (medial trochanter) and are therefore inefficient at lifting both heavy legs, they are also attached to the vertebrae of the lower back and so as legs lift these pull the vertebrae forwards, exerting pressure upon the lower back. In addition the pressure upon the abdominal wall is increased and the abdomen becomes distended, potentially stretching the lower attachments of the abdominal muscles.



### **Adjustments**

In the first version, where we keep the head to floor, some students get a little confused and attempt to lift the hips so if this happens you will need to instruct them to keep the buttocks to the floor. Do scan the class for this.

Students must move on to the crown of the head not the back of the head and if a student has not lifted on to the very top of the head then we can instruct students to press more firmly down into the arms and create more lift in the back so the neck can become more extended.

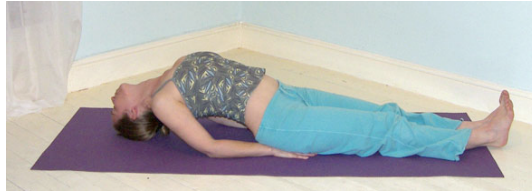
Finally if the ribcage has collapsed it is possible to place a hand beneath the shoulderblade area and instruct the student to move away from the hand or we could position a belt behind the student's back at the level of the shoulderblades and standing astride the student at the hips we can very gently lift the student's chest, although care must be taken with this and a hand placement can be more gentle and encourage students to make the changes themselves, which is always more beneficial.

### **Alternative Entrance:**

Alternatively we can start from dandasana and lower on to forearms, and whilst maintaining a back bend carefully lower the head backwards. This however is not as safe as lifting upwards from the floor because we may not be strong and flexible enough to lower down with integrity and we may inadvertently twist - it is much preferable to lift up against gravity so that we are aware that there is enough openness in the chest and back and that we can hyperextend the neck with care. This version is best avoided in general classes.

## Matsyasana (fish pose)

**Worksheet:**



*Why practice Matsyasana? What are the benefits?*

*What cautions apply and how could this pose be modified? Are there any useful alternatives we can offer instead?*

*What can serve as useful preparation for this pose?*

*How could we stage this pose?*

*What could be a useful counterpose?*