

Ustrasana (camel)

Pronounced oosh-traah-suh-nuh the word ushtra means camel in Sanskrit.

This pose is named camel since its shape is thought to represent the hump of a camel! There are several ways of entering camel with each way possessing different considerations for us because we are either working with or against gravity. As the main pose we shall learn the version where we are working with gravity and then amongst other variations & developments we shall examine the pose where we lift up into camel because this actually requires strength as well as flexibility and so can be both more challenging and safer. Note in the illustration above the head is lowered but this would be the very last thing to do as a development!



Teaching Points:

Stage 1

- Start in a kneeling position with knees placed hip width apart, keep toes tucked under if it is uncomfortable to lay them along the ground, and place padding beneath knees if required
- Place palms either side of the lower back, elbows drawn inwards so they are aligned with the shoulders; shoulders externally rotating, shoulderblades together and drawn down towards the waist.
- Inhaling engage mula bandha & draw both legs as if together, lengthen the whole spine as the sternum lifts creating space between vertebrae
- Exhaling, keeping hips pressed forwards, elbows pressing towards one another as the back arches – the upper back initiating the depth of the backbend, reducing the possibility of any lower back compression
- Explore the positioning of the pelvis checking to see if tucking the tailbone underneath improves the comfort of the lower back; note that tucking the tailbone does naturally diminish the natural curving action of the lower back but may be helpful for some students.
- Keep length in the neck looking forwards: Could stay here and release into child's pose as needed at any point



Stage 2 – stay practicing stage 1 if that was enough

- If possible lower hands to a block or brick maintaining the lift of the sternum, the external rotation of the shoulders
- Gently press down into the support with hands and knees lifting out of them to create a rebound effect helping to keep the spine long and open
- If the hips are not positioned above the knees i.e. perpendicular to the ground or there is any sense of discomfort in the back then we have gone too far and need to practice stage 1



Stage 3 – stay practicing stage 1 or 2 if that was enough

- If possible lower hand to heels with thumbs pointing behind to help maintain the external rotation of the shoulders
- Keep all of the previous teaching points in place so the legs are active as if internally rotating or being drawn together, mula bandha is engaged, the sternum is lifted, shoulders externally rotated, thumbs pointing backwards
- Again press down into the knees & hands creating a rebound effect where we experience a lifting upwards
- Again if the hips are not positioned above the knees i.e. perpendicular to the ground then we have gone too far and need to practice stage 2 or stage 1



- Then if we wish we can allow the head to fall backwards, keeping a sense of length in the neck; [here we must not look around because hyperextension of the neck combined with rotation can be problematic for important nerves & arteries as well as for the vertebral discs]
- Stay here lifting upwards and outwards creating a sense of a long spacious back, and a lengthening & opening along the whole of the front of the body
- Check that the ribs are not flaring outwards which can jam vertebrae between T12 and L1 so here may need to imagine the lowest ribs are being drawn inwards, instead of being pressed outwards
- To exit we inhale lifting upright as if the chest is being lifted upwards and exhaling we can lower back onto the heels.

Version 2: Lifting up from the floor

Stage 1

- Start in kneeling with hands placed to the floor behind, hands at shoulder distance apart with fingers pointing behind – can be on fingertips if this is more comfortable
- Inhaling lift the sternum as hips lift forwards & upwards, pressing down rebounding out of the hands & knees
- Staying lift the hips and sternum just as high as possible, engaging the abdominals as a stretch across the front of the body is experienced, especially of the quadriceps
- To exit lower buttocks to heels
[Note when in the raised position it is possible to walk the hands to the feet to lift into the full position although we must ensure that this can be done without adversely twisting the spine which can create uneven asymmetrical pressure on the spinal column]



Stage 2

- We can start kneeling with hands lightly placed upon the feet, fingertips pointing backwards so there is a sense of the external rotation of the shoulders
- Inhaling lifting buttocks from heels, lift the sternum upwards and hips forwards
- In the full pose the thighs should be perpendicular to the floor and the body fully open as previously there is a slight sense of internal rotation of legs at hips, gentle mula bandha, feeling of pressing down and out of knees and hands for a helpful rebound effect, lifting of the sternum, external rotation of shoulders
- As before we can lower the head back, whilst keeping the neck long, when there is good proprioception, strength and flexibility.
- To exit we inhale lifting upright as if the chest is being lifted upwards and exhaling we can lower back onto the heels.



Drishti point: Be aware of the tip of the nose

Remember for all backbends we must:

- Extend throughout the entire spine, reaching outwards and upwards
- Distribute the curve evenly along the whole spine
- Initiate the backbend by lengthening and lifting the thoracic area of the spine, drawing shoulderblades down and against back, engaging abdominals and lifting the sternum, maintaining the depth of the backbend according to the extent of the thoracic movement. This ensures we do not jam the spine at the hypermobile joints of C7-T1, T12-L1 and L5-S1 by backbending at the points of least resistance
- Having a slight adduction and internal rotation whilst staying still helps to support the lumbar region

- We can explore the positioning of the tailbone (i.e. the extent of pelvic tilt) to see which position best supports us and gives us a feeling of freedom at the lower back.

Benefits:

- Mobilises the shoulders joints
- Opens the chest
- Alleviates respiratory conditions such as asthma
- Stretches the hip flexors and quadriceps, which is helpful at counteracting conditions related to chronic back conditions such as sciatica
- Frees the hip joints
- Gives energy
- Creates feeling of confidence
- Reduces depressive tendencies

Good preparation

Twists, back mobilisers, abdominal and back strengtheners, ankle mobilisers and hip flexor releasers.

Cautions & possible modifications

- For back conditions such as disc injuries, sacroiliac problems and sciatica gentle backbends are generally therapeutic so we must offer gentler versions when the rest of the class is working more intensely.
- For spondylosis where the discs have degenerated or thinned then backbends can aggravate the condition so we must proceed carefully perhaps starting with soft supported backbend such the fish where a roll is place under the thoracic region and slowly move towards more active backbends.
- Abdominal conditions may need softer versions or an alternative such as working with majrasana (cat) or hamsa (seated swan).
- For pregnancy avoid strong backbends so hands to chair seat opening chest and shoulders
- For headaches, heart conditions or un-medicated high blood pressure (over age 30 yrs) work only with softer versions and never drop head backwards
- For stiff ankles we can tuck toes underneath
- For knee problems we can try placing padding beneath knees or we may need to work into a standing backbend instead.
- For neck conditions can keep neck extended looking forwards

Simple versions and modifications



Placing hands upon a brick or block

We can reduce the intensity of the back bend and help to keep the spine long by placing hands upon a brick. We lift out of the hands as we press the brick down against the floor.



Placing hands upon the seat of a chair

Again we can reduce the intensity of the backbend by placing hands upon the seat of a chair.



Variations & Developments

Practice against a wall

An excellent way to check students have drawn their hips forwards is to practice ustrasana with thighs positioned against a wall whilst aiming to keep the hips touching the wall.

Lowering with arms out to sides

Once we are practiced at working from stage to stage we can inhale with arms out to the front and exhaling sweep arms out to sides as we lower into ustrasana.



Cross-legged variation

A nice variation is to work into camel from a crosslegged position. Here we must of course work twice so that we can work with legs crossed each way.



Arms raised

As a development we can reach arms overhead, although we must make sure we still maintain length through the whole spinal column; this is a development because here the weight of the fully flexed arms means the body must work harder to support the arms (leverage).

Adjustments

If a student appears to be collapsing at the lower back or the chest is lower than the shoulders we can place a hand lightly at the thoracic region of the back and instruct the student to lift the back away from the hand. Or we may offer a student a prop if we feel that this would help them to lift into a more open position – this is especially necessary if in the full pose we see that hips are not above the knees.

It is also possible to help a student individually if they wish to try lowering the head back for the first time and here we can cradle the head in our hands and help them lower and lift the head.