

hot wheel

The intensity of full Wheel Pose offers an ideal opportunity to cultivate steadiness, under any circumstances.

Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose) is an uplifting posture. It stimulates the nervous system and opens the heart, and can leave you glowing with energy and vitality for the rest of the day. But Urdhva Dhanurasana can also be used as a tool for gaining clarity and focus. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali writes, “Effort toward **steadiness of mind** is practice” (I.13). If you apply that principle to your Urdhva Dhanurasana practice, you’ll discover a whole new layer of potential in the pose.

“Urdhva Dhanurasana is a challenging posture,” says Natasha Rizopoulos, a senior teacher at Yoga-Works, who lives in Boston. “But challenging postures are the best places to work on steadying the mind. The challenges become a place for you to really focus and pay attention.” To begin a mindful approach to Urdhva Dhanurasana, start by setting an intention >



A video of this Master Class sequence can be found online at yogajournal.com/livemag.

1 Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

This pose teaches many of the anatomical actions you need to use in Urdhva Dhanurasana. Create a straight line from your hands to your hips, with a 180-degree angle in the shoulders. Keep the legs in a neutral, nonrotated position, parallel and hip-distance apart. Press down through each hand and lift your inner shoulder toward the ceiling. Hold for 2 to 5 minutes. Quiet the mind by focusing your attention on a steady *drishti* (gaze).



2 Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand)

Here, you'll continue to work on keeping the arms parallel and opening the shoulders at a 180-degree angle for Urdhva Dhanurasana. Root down through every knuckle in each hand as a way of moving energy up toward the feet. Spin your inner thighs toward the wall and keep the same neutral position of the legs that you had in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Direct the flesh of the buttocks to the heels to lengthen the lower back. Every breath or two, shimmy your heels up the wall again. Cultivate mindfulness by focusing on your balance and distributing your weight evenly in the hands.

3 King Arthur's Pose

Place your left hip just to the inside of your left heel and your left leg in an up-the-wall Virasana (Hero Pose) position. Bring your right foot back so that your right knee is at a 90-degree angle, and your buttocks and back are at the wall. Lift your arms above your head into a parallel-arm Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute) position. Drop the tailbone and move the front ribs toward the frontal hipbones to lengthen the lower back. Stay present with the physical intensity of the stretch in this pose as a way to cultivate mindfulness while opening the hip flexors for Urdhva Dhanurasana.



4 Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)

With your thighs and knees parallel, lift the hips by engaging the hamstring muscles. Interlace your fingers beneath your back and roll your outer upper arms under, pressing down through your outer shoulders. Release your inner thighs down toward the floor and extend the flesh of the buttocks toward your knees to lengthen the lower back. Practice a smooth, steady breath, establishing a tone of evenness and calm that you'll re-create when opening your heart and lengthening your spine again in the final pose.



5 Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose)

Enter this final pose slowly and deliberately, with the intention of staying focused on an even curve in the spine and keeping a steady mind. Once in the pose, re-create the evenly rooted hands, parallel arms, and open shoulders from Adho Mukha Svanasana and Adho Mukha Vrksasana. Keep your knees slightly bent and stacked directly over your ankles, with your feet hip-distance apart and parallel. As you move into your full backbend, see if you can bring your navel to the highest point of the curve.

(benefits)

- Opens the chest and shoulders
- Stretches the internal organs in the front of the body
- Increases the mobility of the upper back, improving posture
- Lengthens the hip flexors
- Strengthens the arms and legs
- Energizes and uplifts

(contraindications)

- High blood pressure
- Glaucoma, detached retina
- Wrist problems, carpal tunnel syndrome
- Back problems, especially disk injuries
- Second and third trimesters of pregnancy

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➤ to open evenly and progressively into it, as opposed to simply going for your biggest pose at all costs. The most intelligent and advanced Urdhva Dhanurasana is not the biggest one you can muster, but one in which the spine is an even, rounded curve.

It takes mindfulness to achieve this. The evenness of the spine is often thwarted by tightness in either the shoulders or the hip flexors. To avoid the resistance from that tightness, you overcompensate at the junctures where the spine changes direction. This results in an uneven backbend with little points in it, which causes jamming and potential injury. However, if you bring focus and patience into your practice, you can learn to open into the spine deliberately and evenly. “We tend to rush through hard things,” says Rizopoulos. “If you go slowly and can be more interested in the actions than in the result, you’ll be better able to find that even curve and do so from a place that is calmer and more composed.”

Once you are in Urdhva Dhanurasana, you can continue to cultivate a steady mind. Tune in to the places where you feel tight—the hip flexors and shoulders, for most people—and make a mental note for the next time you practice to address those areas with preparatory poses like the ones offered in this sequence. When you do feel resistance in the shoulders or hip flexors, Rizopoulos suggests that you stay present enough to linger for a moment with the tension instead of trying to avoid the discomfort by forcing yourself further into the pose. You can also use a soft and unwavering *drishti* (gaze) to steady the mind throughout this sequence as you prepare for this demanding posture.

Practice with the clear intention of maintaining a quiet mind, move slowly and deliberately, and stay present with sensation. You’ll not only enable your body to practice this pose for years to come but also cultivate the ability to keep a steady mind in stimulating situations—a great tool you can use in everyday life.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Warm up your thoracic spine with eight cycles of Cat-Cow Pose. Then practice

three rounds of Surya Namaskar A, followed by some simple lunges in which you emphasize pressing the back thigh up toward the ceiling as you drop your tailbone toward the floor. Next, do three rounds of Surya Namaskar B. This short sequence will begin to open your chest, shoulders, and hip flexors. To stretch the quadriceps and imprint the parallel orientation of the legs, sit in a modified version of Virasana (Hero Pose), with the thighs parallel, and the knees and thighs hip-distance apart. Feel free to sit on a block if you need to. From here, place your arms in Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose) position to continue opening your shoulders.

ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)



Adho Mukha Svanasana teaches you to keep your arms straight, parallel, and shoulder-distance apart, and your feet and legs in a neutral, nonrotated position, parallel and hip-distance apart. It also teaches you to distribute weight equally in the arms and legs. It will be easier to learn these actions here, because Adho Mukha Svanasana is less disorienting than Urdhva Dhanurasana and can be held longer. Adho Mukha Svanasana is also known to promote steadiness of mind, a quality you want to cultivate to prepare for Urdhva Dhanurasana.

Start in Balasana (Child’s Pose) with your arms reaching forward, your hands shoulder-distance apart, and your elbows straight. Root down evenly through your knuckles to create some resistance, and lift the forearms away from the mat. Track your attention up your arms to the part of your shoulders that is closest to your ears. Lift your inner shoulders up toward the ceiling to broaden around the base of your neck. Simultaneously, firm your outer upper arms in to engage your triceps and keep your arms straight. Inhale as you come to all fours, then exhale and push back to Adho Mukha Svanasana. Focus

your attention on a soft and steady drishti toward your feet.

Create a straight line from your hands to your hips, with a 180-degree angle in the shoulders. Press down through the whole of each hand, creating power in your forearms, and keep the lift of your inner shoulder toward the ceiling. Avoid sinking through the armpit. From the strength in your arms, continue to press your hips back and up, and lengthen the back and front body equally. Have a sense of your shoulder blades gently pressing in toward your chest, while directing your front ribs toward your frontal hipbones. Use long, even breaths to create steadiness in the pose and still the mind.

Rizopoulos recommends a long hold for Adho Mukha Svanasana (start with two minutes, and build up to five). The longer you hold it, the more it will open your shoulders, imprint the alignment in your shoulders and legs, and teach you to create the same quality of mind that is useful for Urdhva Dhanurasana. When you are ready, return to Balasana.

ADHO MUKHA VRKSASANA (Handstand)



Adho Mukha Vrksasana continues the themes of keeping the arms parallel and opening the shoulders at 180-degree angles. In this pose, you also bring your shoulders directly over your wrists, which is an action you'll repeat in Urdhva Dhanurasana.

Take Adho Mukha Svanasana, with your fingertips four to five inches from the wall. Set an intention to stay focused and quiet as you head into an energizing inversion. On an inhalation, rock your shoulders forward so they stack directly over your wrists, and look slightly forward of your fingertips. Step your feet in a few inches to get your hips a little higher, and come onto your tiptoes in a short, high Adho Mukha Svanasana. Commit to a steady drishti to draw your attention firmly into the present moment. Exhale and step your right foot forward,

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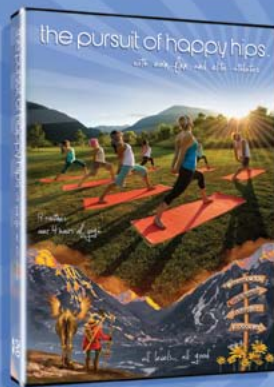
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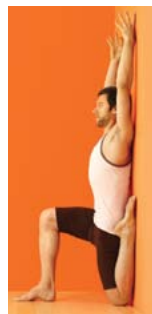
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halfway to your hands. Then inhale and gently push off that foot as the left leg lifts to the wall, with the right leg following. Lengthen toward the ceiling equally through both legs, flex your feet, and shimmy your heels up the wall. Spin your inner thighs toward the wall and keep the same neutral position of your legs that you had in Adho Mukha Svanasana. Move the flesh of the buttocks toward your heels and direct your gaze in front of you.

Begin to repeat the actions you took in Adho Mukha Svanasana, and root down through every knuckle in your hands as a way of moving energy up toward your feet. Every breath or two, shimmy your heels up the wall again. Continue to cultivate mindfulness by paying attention to maintaining balance in the pose. Draw your inner shoulder blades away from the base of your neck and gently press your shoulder blades in toward your chest while directing your front ribs toward your frontal hipbones. Observe how this prevents you from sinking into the lower back or the armpits. Stay for 8 to 10 long, steady breaths.

To come down, keep one leg reaching up the wall for as long as possible as you gently release the other leg toward the floor. You can lift back into Handstand from here two or three more times. Practice switching your lead leg, and take Balasana to rest between lifts.

KING ARTHUR'S POSE



For this sequence, you'll practice King Arthur's Pose in two stages. In the first stage you'll stretch the iliopsoas (the muscle that runs from the lumbar spine through the pelvic region to the top of the thighbone). In the second stage, you'll stretch the rectus femoris (the front of the quadriceps). Lengthening these muscles will open your lower body in Urdhva Dhanurasana, but it can feel intense. Remember to remain present and calm in the face of these sensations.

Have two blocks and a blanket nearby. Start in tabletop position with your feet

at the wall. Tuck your toes under, with the balls of your feet touching the wall. Stack your hips above your knees and your shoulders over your wrists. Take your left knee to the base of the wall where the floor and the wall meet (you can use a blanket to pad your knee). With your left shin against the wall and your left toe pointing straight up, step your right foot forward until your right knee is at 90 degrees. Plant your palms on blocks on either side of the right foot to bring openness in the chest. Drop your tailbone and lift your lower belly and chest. Hold for 10 to 12 breaths.

Move slowly and deliberately to the next stage, remaining attentive and responsive to your body's messages. Use support from the blocks to shift your hips back to the wall. Take your left hip to the inside of your left heel so your left leg is in Virasana. Shimmy your right foot back, bring your right knee to 90 degrees, with your buttocks and back at the wall (be mindful and back off if the sensation in your left knee becomes more than a dull ache). If your buttocks are at the wall, lift your arms to a parallel-arm Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute), reinforcing the parallel arms and the 180-degree angle in the shoulders you'll need for Urdhva Dhanurasana. Keep dropping the tailbone and move the front ribs toward the frontal hipbones, lengthening the lower back and directing the stretch to the hip flexors. Slowly release and change sides.

SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA

(Bridge Pose)



Setu Bandha Sarvangasana will teach you how to position your legs for Urdhva Dhanurasana as well as how to create length in your lower back.

Lie on your back, knees above your heels, feet and thighs hip-distance apart and parallel. Recommit to remaining even and balanced in the pose, in both your physical body and your mental approach. Reach your fingers toward your heels and

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adjust your feet so your fingertips graze the back of your heels. Pull your shoulders closer to your ears to soften the trapezius muscles, and turn your palms to face the ceiling. On an inhalation, slowly press down with your feet and lift your hips. Tune in to the places that feel tight, using the physical sensations to focus and direct your mind. Keep your thighs and knees parallel and, while keeping your feet fixed, isometrically draw your heels toward your buttocks. This will help you use your hamstrings rather than your gluteus muscles to lift, and will release compression across your lower back by preventing your thighs from separating. You'll repeat this movement in Urdhva Dhanurasana.

To complete the pose, interlace your fingers beneath you and, without pulling your shoulders further from your ears, roll your outer upper arms under and press down through your outer shoulders. Release your inner thighs down toward the floor and extend the flesh of the buttocks toward your knees, lengthening your lower back. This will make the pose feel both wide and long, a spaciousness you'll want to re-create in Urdhva Dhanurasana. Continue to practice smooth, steady breathing, establishing a tone of evenness and calm.

Take 8 to 10 breaths in the pose. Keep your knees directly over your ankles as you release.

URDHVA DHANURASANA

(Upward Bow Pose)



Before you press up into Urdhva Dhanurasana, take a moment to establish an intention to remain present and

patient as you explore the pose. Let it become a vehicle for mindfulness in addition to being a powerful backbend. The real work of the pose happens before you go up, says Rizopoulos. Focus on the set-up, and you will be physically and energetically more aligned and relaxed as you get to the final shape.

Lie on your back with the wall behind your head and with your feet and legs

in the same position as in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana. Place your hands on the floor beside your ears, shoulder-distance apart, fingertips just beneath the shoulders. Draw your elbows shoulder-distance apart and turn your hands out slightly if you need help moving the elbows into alignment. You don't want your elbows opening out to the sides, away from the midline, which can cause damage to the soft tissue in the shoulder and create tightness at the base of the neck and in the upper back. On an exhalation, lift up partway and lower onto the crown of your head. (Avoid dragging your head into position, which can compress the neck.)

From here, Rizopoulos advises three steps to prepare yourself to go up. First, keep your feet and knees hip-distance apart and recommit to maintaining your elbows back, shoulder-distance apart. Next, pull your elbows away from the wall to draw your arms deeper into their sockets. Then lift your sternum toward the wall (without lifting your head) to bring a deeper curve into the thoracic spine.

Now you're ready for liftoff. Maintain these actions and inhale; slowly lift your shoulder blades and sacrum simultaneously and evenly to press straight up. Stay focused on the intention of creating an even curve as opposed to getting as high up as you can. Move toward a 180-degree angle in your shoulders, re-creating the openness you worked on in Adho Mukha Svanasana and Adho Mukha Vrksasana. Keep your arms and legs parallel to each other. Spin your triceps toward your face to maintain the external rotation in your arms that will prevent your armpits from puffing out toward the wall behind you. Keep your knees slightly bent and stack them directly over your ankles—straightening your legs in Urdhva Dhanurasana can cause compression in the back and overstretching in the armpits.

Most important, stay with the true shape of your pose. If you notice tightness in the hip flexors or shoulders, simply make a mental note of it and be present with the sensation there; avoid compensating by pushing into the lower back. Re-create the hands of Adho Mukha Vrksasana and the feet of Adho Mukha

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Svanasana. As you move into your full backbend, see if you can bring your navel to the highest point of the curve.

You can step your feet closer to your hands to go deeper, but only if your knees remain stacked over your ankles and your shins stay perpendicular to the floor.

Hold for five to eight breaths, maintaining smooth, even breathing. Then tuck your chin, bend your elbows (keeping them shoulder-distance apart), and lower back down to the same place on the mat where you started, keeping your knees directly over your ankles. If you thrust your pelvis forward on the dismount, says Rizopoulos, your knees will move forward past your feet, which will put your knees at risk for injury.

TO FINISH

After you come down, roll to your side and gently push yourself up to Dandasana (Staff Pose). Take several breaths here in preparation for a series of quieting poses. Advanced backbends should always be followed by 15 to 20 minutes of quieting

poses so you can bring your energy down in a progressive way, Rizopoulos says. Follow Dandasana with Janu Sirsasana (Head-of-the-Knee Pose), Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend), Halasana (Plow Pose), Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand), Halasana, and a simple reclining twist.

Finish by spending a few minutes in either Savasana (Corpse Pose) or seated meditation. Observe the way your practice has affected the quality of your mind. Over time, you'll notice that practicing Urdhva Dhanurasana with patience, deliberation, and a spirit of inquiry will not only open and strengthen you physically but also teach you to be calm and focused on and off the mat. ❖

Karen Macklin is a writer, editor, and yoga teacher living in San Francisco. Visit her at karenmacklin.com. Natasha Rizopoulos teaches around the world and is featured in Yoga Journal's Step-by-Step Home Practice System DVD series. For more information, visit natasharizopoulos.com.

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