

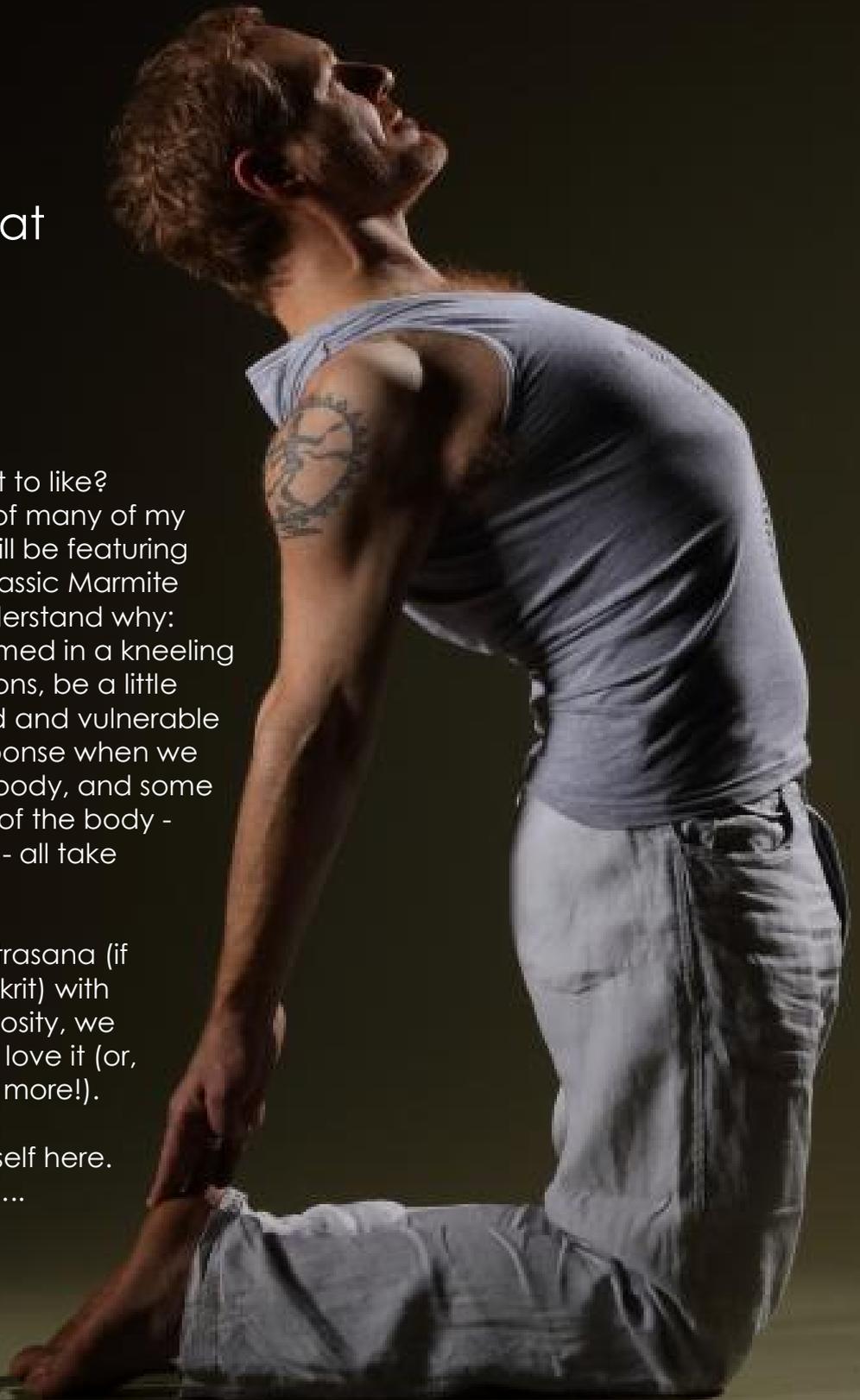
Opening up to Ustrasana

An in-depth look at
Camel pose with
Richard Fowler

Aah, camel pose! What's not to like? Well, judging from response of many of my students when they hear it will be featuring in a class, quite a lot. It's a classic Marmite asana, and I can kind of understand why: this strong back bend performed in a kneeling position can, on first impressions, be a little intimidating. Feeling exposed and vulnerable is an entirely reasonable response when we open the whole of the front body, and some of the most vulnerable parts of the body - knees, neck and lower back - all take centre stage in camel pose.

However, if we approach Ustrasana (if you're partial to a bit of Sanskrit) with patience and a sense of curiosity, we can embrace it and learn to love it (or, if you're like me, love it even more!).

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. Let's get back to basics first.....

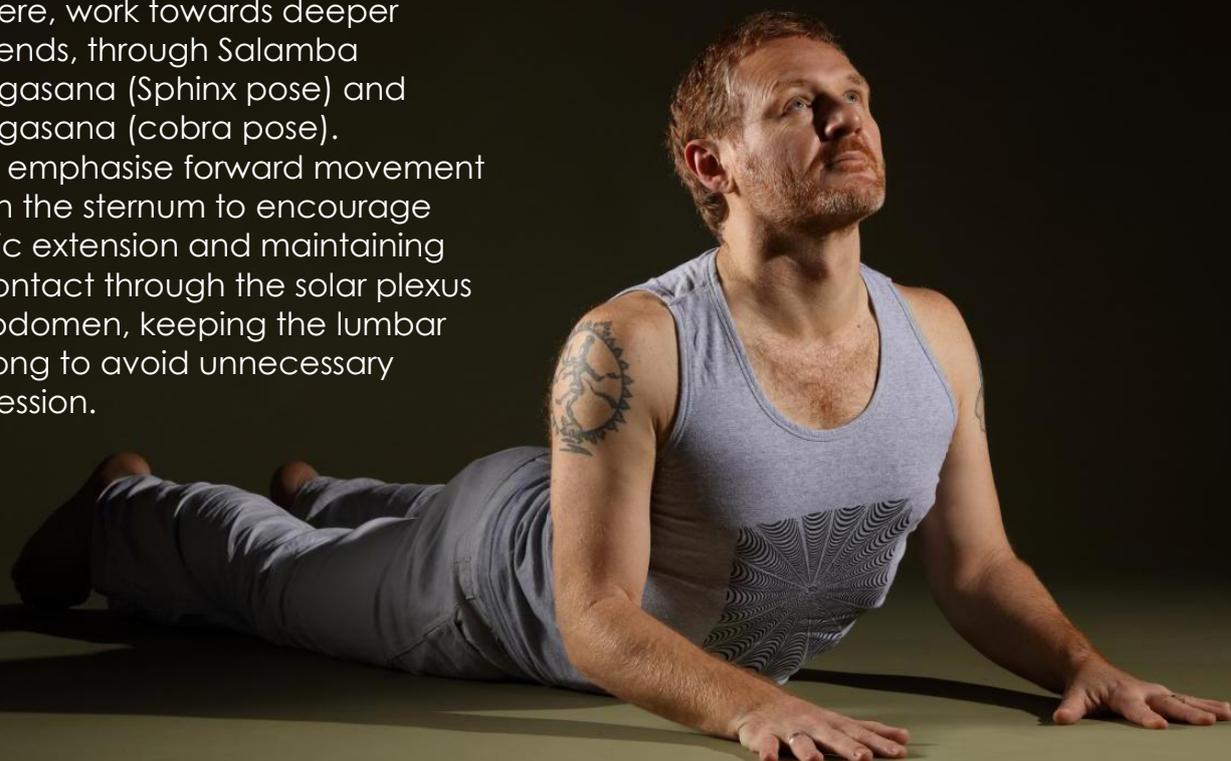


The benefits: Ustrasana offers a whole heap of benefits: strengthening and mobilising the spine and hips, it stretches the abdominal and respiratory muscles, opens the chest and shoulders, and, as with all back bends, leaves us uplifted and energised with that wonderful combination of alertness and relaxation which is one of yoga's great gifts. And all that opening up stimulates Anahata (the heart chakra), making it perfect for Spring.

The Warm Up

In preparation for **Ustrasana**, we'll need to make sure we warm and mobilise the spine and the shoulders. My shoulders are always happiest after Gomukhasana (cow face pose) arms, and you can't beat a seated version of Marjariasana (cat/cow pose) for preparing both the shoulders and the spine. Rolling the shoulders back and down, pull lightly on the knees as you breathe in to activate the serratus anterior muscles and manifest that lift in the sternum that awakens the thoracic spine and prepares us for more heart opening to come.

From here, work towards deeper backbends, through Salamba Bhujangasana (Sphinx pose) and Bhujangasana (cobra pose). I like to emphasise forward movement through the sternum to encourage thoracic extension and maintaining floor contact through the solar plexus and abdomen, keeping the lumbar spine long to avoid unnecessary compression.



Looking after vulnerable areas:

The **knees** tend to be vulnerable in Ustrasana. Not only do they bear the body's weight directly, but students can also tend to flex the knees beyond 90 degrees as they strive to reach their heels, tilting the whole of the body from knees up away from the perpendicular, adding the knees' burden.

The main issue in the **lumbar spine** is potential injury and strain through compression. Significant weight bearing and leverage from a misaligned upper body can put students at risk if they push themselves beyond their capacity in terms of strength and flexibility. However, working with Ustrasana strengthens the back muscles, with sustained practice ultimately making it less vulnerable .



Far be it from me to challenge the teachings of one of the towering figures of modern yoga practice, but my advice to students would be to avoid the Iyengar approach to Ustrasana, which seems to involve a rather alarming degree of lumbar compression.

The **cervical spine** is something of an evolutionary compromise, with a trade-off between the mobility and stable bearing of the weight of the head. This compromise contributes to its vulnerability, with neck hyperextension compressing the cervical spine's facet joints and putting pressure on major nerves and blood vessels passing through the neck. Yoga publications appear divided on whether to hold the head or let it drop back: The British Wheel of Yoga has traditionally advised caution; Iyengar's approach, which seems to condone hyperextension, is, in my view, best avoided. My preference is to draw the chin towards the chest to align the skull with the top of the spine.

The pose

Aligning the hips directly above the knees supports weight bearing and stability, and can help reduce compression in the lumbar spine, as does resting the palms of the hands on the tops of the buttocks, fingers pointing down, pushing forward through the pelvis to maintain the thighs in a vertical position, perpendicular to the floor. Squeezing inwards with the lower half of the body will help establish a strong foundation.

Of course, spending any amount of time in a tall kneeling position isn't everyone's cup of tea, so you might wish to use some padding, such as a blanket or folded-up yoga mat, under your knees.

From here we have the option of keeping the toes curled under or, if you are familiar and confident with Ustrasana, letting the tops of the feet press down into the floor for a deeper backbend. The advantage of having the toes curled under is that the heels are a little easier to reach with the finger tips as you move into the full expression of the pose.

Moving into the pose, drawing elbows together will help open the chest, collar bones and shoulders. Try to avoid leading with the head, instead lifting up through the sternum to emphasise thoracic extension and avoid excessive lumbar compression.



Students often tighten their buttocks in this pose, though this adds pressure to the sacroiliac joint at the base of the spine, so my recommendation would be to relax the buttocks as far as possible (sound advice in all sorts of situations).

We're in no hurry here, so move slowly and purposefully. If the full pose isn't for you, keep the hands on your hips to support the lumbar spine. Alternatively, you may wish to take one hand back to the corresponding heel and keep one hand on the hip to offer lumbar support, or use blocks to effectively bring the floor closer to your hands.

It's at this point, reaching back to find the toes, that you might find you've lost that vertical alignment of hips over knees, with the whole body hinging back from the knees. This imposes real strain on the anterior cruciate ligament and so is best avoided, but it can be addressed by pressing front of the hips forwards to restore the thighs to their vertical position.

If you're comfortable holding one heel, you might want to reach back with the other arm to hold both heels. How long you remain the pose is a matter of personal preference. For me, 30-60 seconds is fine, allowing time for focus on lifting the sternum to emphasise thoracic extension and stretching the whole of the front body. But if 5-10 seconds is your preference, then go with that. Remember: you're not doing this pose for anyone else; you're doing it for yourself, working to your capacity, content with where you are in your practice. After all, as the Bhagavad Gita tells us, we have the power to act but not dictate the results so, as best you can, free yourself from striving for "the perfect pose" and focus instead on the quality of your action. Don't forget to balance your *sthira* (strength, steadiness) with your *sukha* (ease, comfort), so as not to strain the body with the depth of your pose.

Moving out of the pose, return one hand to the hips and then the second to give lumbar support before lifting the torso upright. Again, moving slowly and with purpose is the thing, but just make sure you maintain some kind of support for the lower back, either with one hand on the hips or one on the heel. Nothing sends a shiver up my spine like seeing a student dangling their arms behind them in search of a heel while their lower back remains unsupported!

After such a strong backbend, don't forget to counterpose: child's pose in the first instance, then moving through Paschimottanasana (seated forward fold), Jithara Parvrtti (reclining twist) and Marjariasana (cat/cow pose). I love Paschimottanasana's deep stretch to the whole of the back body, and the opportunity to gradually surrender to the pose, mirroring and complementing Ustrasana. Once again, the key words here are patience and persistence: move gently with the breath, easing off your stretch as you inhale and, as you exhale, observing whether the body is happy to let you in further.

I can't quite put my finger on what it is that makes Ustrasana so special but maybe it's the way it requires us to be courageous, to make ourselves vulnerable, both physically and through the opening our hearts to the world, that makes it feel so refreshing and liberating.

Richard teaches regular weekly classes and monthly workshops around Manchester, and is the BWY County Rep for Greater & Isle of Man. For more information, visit www.richardfowleryoga.com

