



Chakrasana — Wheel Pose

*"From the purification
of one's essence,
cheerfulness arises..."*

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras II.41

Chakrasana is a very powerful and exhilarating backbend. It has the ability to purify the body and dissolve negativity in the mind. Chakra means wheel in Sanskrit and is also the name given to the energy centres located within our spiritual anatomy. In the final pose, the shape of the body resembles a wheel or circle. The pose is also named Chakrasana because of the potential effect the asana has on bringing awareness and prana to the chakra system. This asana also goes by the name of Urdhva Dhanurasana, the Upward Bow Pose.

The effects of Chakrasana are very distinct and tangible. Every cell feels purified; the energy channels are opened, allowing prana to flood fully throughout the body. The mind becomes very clear and lucid. It is wonderful to pause after coming down from the pose to experience these results.

In practicing Chakrasana, our awareness and energy expand to permeate the whole body. Our normal upright posture is dramatically altered, giving us an opportunity to see ourselves from a totally new perspective. The back of the body comes into our inner field of awareness, whereas normally it is hidden from our vision. Fears, both

known and unknown that we hold within our body, can be permanently released through the power of this asana. Courage and inner strength are developed as well as confidence and determination.

It takes focus and calm awareness to practice Chakrasana safely. This is true for all three phases of the pose: coming into, sustaining, and coming out of the posture. All phases are equally important.

Chakrasana requires great strength and flexibility in the arms and shoulders, as well as in the thighs and spine. It is not recommended for beginners. The areas to be especially mindful of in Chakrasana are the knees, the lower and middle spine, the shoulders, and the wrists. It is important not to push past discomfort to accomplish the pose. Moving towards the completed pose in stages will give you excellent benefits, even if you do not achieve the final position.

Important: If you are an older student, or have had any spinal injuries or spinal degeneration, wrist or shoulder injuries, please consult an experienced yoga teacher or yoga therapist who can advise you personally.

Preparation

Here is a list of eight practices to do consistently before approaching Chakrasana.

1. Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) to build heat and release muscular tension.
2. Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I Pose) to build heat and open groins and front thighs.
3. Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) to strengthen back body and open the front body.
4. Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) to carry the arc of the backbend into the thoracic area and to open the belly.
5. Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) to deeply open the belly and chest.
6. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog Pose) variation of bending and straightening the elbows to build strength in the arms.
7. Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose) to stretch the triceps and pectorals.
8. Bolster backbend to passively open the front body.

While we do want to be thoroughly warmed up for Chakrasana, we do not want to be fatigued. We need to be fully present for safe practice.

Sequence of actions

If you are really strong in the upper body, you might be able to muscle your way up into the pose, but you will place the body at risk of injury. If you abruptly push up into the asana, it may look impressive on the outside, yet something important will be lacking. You may be missing some of the main points of asana practice: self-discovery, a stable, easeful body and mind, expansion of prana, and spontaneous meditation.

Variation one

Our initial pose will make use of a wall, a long bolster, and two yoga blocks. Ideally, the wall has skirting boards.

Place the narrow side of a yoga mat at the wall.

Place the short end of the bolster at the wall.

Place the two blocks long ways on the skirting board so they are at an angle as shown.

Placement of the body to begin

After warming up, lie on the bolster with the top of the head touching or close to the wall. Ideally the entire spine is on the bolster.

Bend the knees and place the feet on the floor about hip width apart. Have the shins vertical to avoid excess pressure in the knees. Avoid splaying the knees and feet laterally in the pose as it can create excess compression in the lower spine.

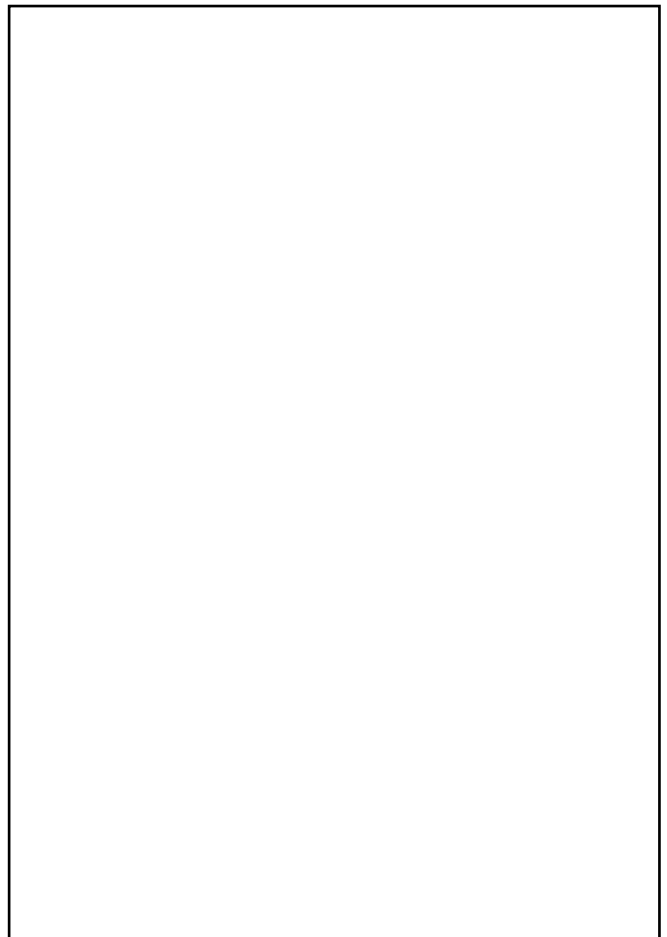
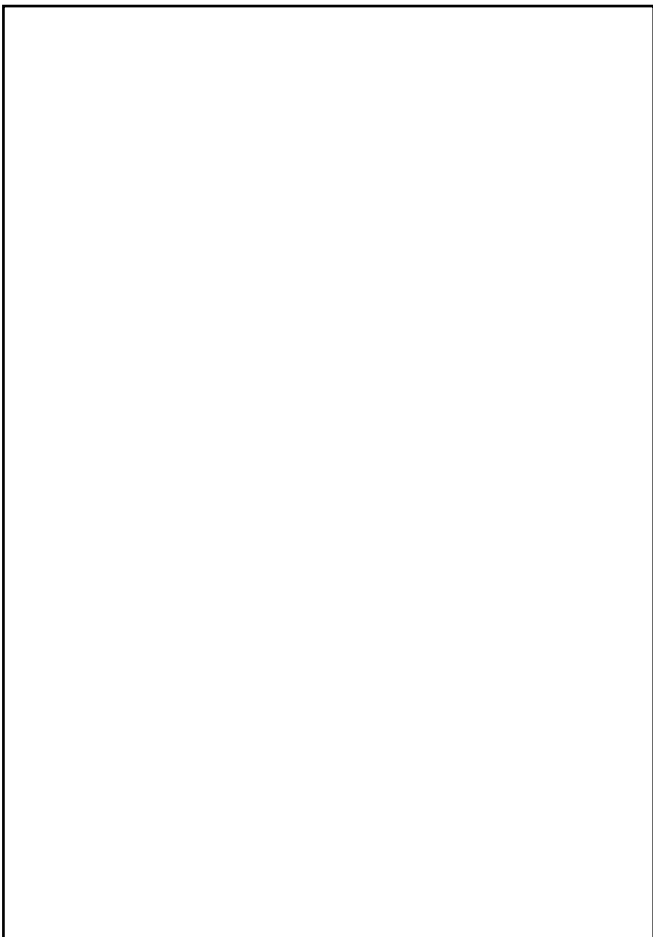
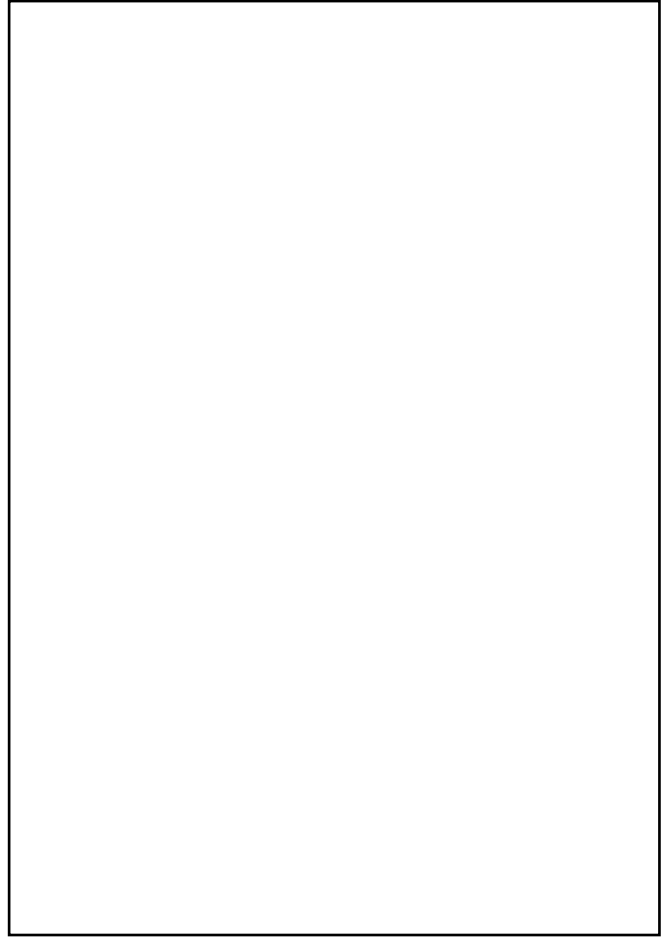
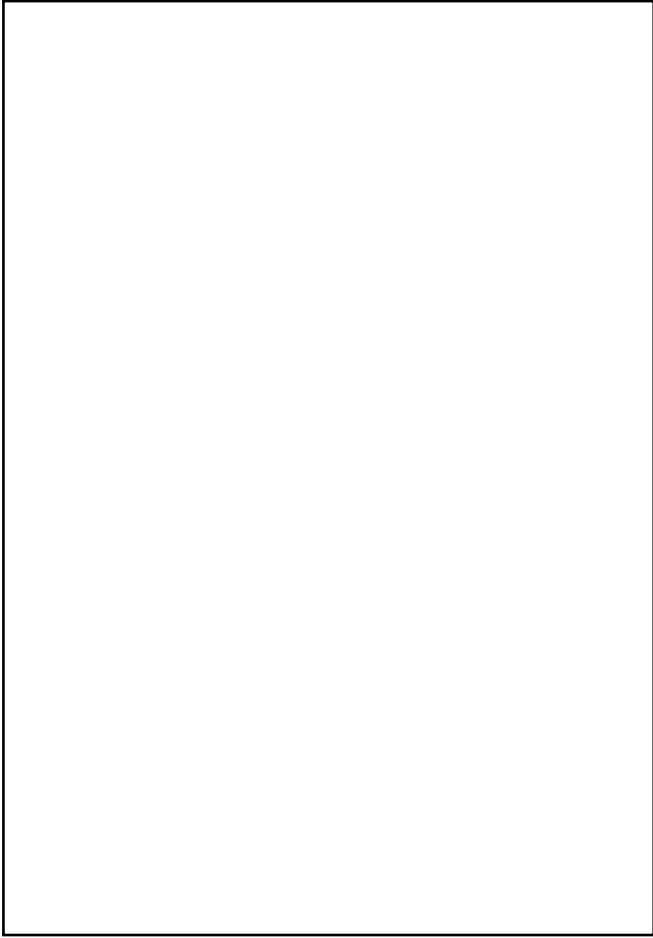
Shoulder position for maximum stability

Bring the arms up alongside the head. Bend the elbows and place the palms down on the blocks as shown in the photograph. The

hands are positioned shoulder width apart or slightly wider. The fingers face the outside edge of the shoulders. Notice the angle of the wrists in relationship to the forearms. The blocks help to protect the wrists by creating a more open angle, thus minimising compression in the wrist joints. Bring the elbows in above the wrists. In other words, the elbows are not splayed open to the sides; they are in line with the hands. Move the vertical forearms towards the wall. If need be, open the hands wider apart for this to happen.

The position of the hands and arms will maximise the strength of the triceps, the main muscles that straighten the elbow. Do your best to maintain this position of the arms as you lift up into the pose, as well as when you lower down from the pose. Now, gently squeeze inward with the heels of the hands. This, in effect, spins the fingers a bit outward to the sides. Move your shoulder blades upward into the back. By employing all the actions outlined above, you have just externally rotated and stabilised the shoulder joints. This will make the pose safer for the shoulders. Take a few smooth breaths to integrate this alignment.







Decompressing the spine

As you initiate the ascension into the pose, there are some clear ways to minimise potential compression in the spine. Maintain the shoulder, arm, and hand action described above and press down and towards the wall with the hands. This begins the transference of weight towards the feet. Avoid pushing down with the feet at this point. Pushing down with the feet will bring weight to the hands and abruptly move most of the weight to the upper body, making it much more difficult to lift up into the full pose.

The intention is to move the pelvis towards the knees, thereby lengthening the lower spine and bringing weight to the feet and legs. Actively take the concave curve out of your lumbar spine and lead with the tailbone towards the backs of the knees. You are creating space in the posterior lumbar spine and especially the lumbar-sacral joint, which can tend to be compressed in backbends. As the weight comes towards the feet, lift the heels up, helping the lower spine lengthen out even more. Now you are on the balls of the feet, with the lower spine lengthened. The elbows are squeezing in, as well as the heels of the hands. Keep the knees from

rolling open by activating the inner thighs and pressing the balls of the feet downward. Exhale as you move the pelvis towards the knees.

Ascension

Now, press the balls of the feet down to begin ascending to the next stage of the pose. The legs are doing most of the work to begin the lift off. As the weight starts coming towards the hands, press them down to peel the head off the floor.

Inhale into your expanding chest, and as you exhale, press the hands down to straighten the arms and

lift the chest high away from the bolster. If you can lift all the way up with straight arms, do so. If there is a binding in the shoulders, lower back down carefully. Repeat lifting up and lowering down two or three times. Reverse the steps to come down and rest.

If you want to continue into the pose, inhale into the lifting ribcage as the arms straighten. Press down with the balls of the feet to shift more weight towards the hands. There is a distinct flowing motion in the body as the weight transfers from the feet towards the hands. This is accomplished by the action of the feet pressing downward. Remaining on the balls of the feet at this stage is an option that will lessen the pressure in the lower spine.

As the weight is transferred towards the hands, the whole spine cooperates into the backbend. The chest will move forward towards the space between the arms. The shoulder blades move upward into the body and the breastbone lifts towards the sky. It is important that, as the weight gets transferred to the arms and hands, you allow the natural lumbar sacral movement to take place. This means you no longer attempt to lengthen (tuck)



Benefits

- Stimulating for the body and mind
- Natural anti-depressant
- Stimulating to the nervous system and adrenals
- Purifying for all the systems of the body
- Improves circulation
- Improves respiration
- Strengthens arms and upper body
- Strengthens spinal extensor muscles, gluteal region, and hamstrings
- Increases flexibility in shoulders, wrists, and upper back
- Opens/stretches groin, belly, anterior ribcage, diaphragm, and chest

Contraindications/Cautions

- Pregnancy
- Menstruation
- Lumbar spine injuries
- Recent abdominal surgery
- Cervical spine conditions
- RSI wrist pain
- Migraines
- Heart trouble

the tailbone. The upper sacrum where it meets the lumbar spine (L5-S1) moves up into the body and the lumbar spine moves naturally into its concave curve of extension. The nodding into the body of the upper sacrum is called nutation and it passively accompanies lumbar extension. You know this is happening when you feel a wonderful stretching of the belly.

As the arms move towards being straight, you have the option to continue drawing inward with the heels of the hand. This can do wonders to stabilise the shoulders.

Being in the pose

When you are ready to hold for a few breaths, begin to explore pressing the heels down in small increments. As the heels nestle into the floor, maintain the lift of the upper sacrum, and expand through the ribs and chest. Release the head down with gravity. To go deeper into the backbend, move the chest between the arms by pressing the feet into the floor. As the feet and hands dynamically anchor downward, the rest of the body is liberated to rebound up into this energizing backbend.

Breathe steadily. In the beginning, the breath may be shallow as the body gets used to the new



relationship with gravity. With practice, deep breathing will provide you with the necessary fuel to hold the pose for longer periods. Relax the face and eyes and spread your inner awareness to expand through the entire body.

Descending to the floor

Come down with the same awareness and control as you maintained in moving into and holding the pose. To descend safely, you can lift the heels again coming up onto the balls of the feet. Squeeze the elbows inward above the hands as the elbows bend. Draw inward with the heels

of the hands and begin lengthening the pelvis towards the knees. You are reversing the steps of coming into the pose. This will prevent compression of the lower spine on the descent. As the head comes closer towards the bolster, bring the chin in towards the throat to lay the back of the head down gently.

As the spine lowers to the bolster, maintain the scooping under of the pelvis and pause here. You are on the balls of feet with the pelvis close to the lower legs. This is a great de-compressing counter pose. Exhale and lower the spine back to the bolster as you step the feet out and lower the heels. Bring the arms

around to the sides of the torso with palms facing upward. Pause here and relax deeply, absorbing the after affects.

Variation two – without props

If you have sensitive wrists, shoulders, or spine, stay with the bolster variation described above. Proceed to this free-standing variation when your body has been conditioned with the preparatory poses and variation number one.

Practice tips

Remember to have the hands close to the outer edge of the shoulders with the elbows drawn in above them.

Anchor the entire rim of the palms downward as well as lightly pressing the finger pads down.

To begin moving into the pose, press the hands down and away from the feet to direct the pelvis towards the knees. This will lessen the weight bearing on the hands and serve to decompress the spine.

Anchor the balls of the feet downward to lift up and straighten the arms. The legs are doing most of the effort to ascend into the pose.

Pay particular attention to the transference of weight from the feet

to the hands as you rise into the pose.

Anchor the feet and hands down to rebound everything else upwards.

Counter poses

Apanasana (Knees to Chest Pose): When you are ready, draw one knee at a time into the chest. Be here for a few breaths hugging the knees with the arms. Rocking side to side on the lower back. Then cup the knees with the hands and trace circles with the knees.

Jathara Parvrittasana (Supine Twist): With knees bent and feet on the floor, shift your hips slightly to the right. Inhale, open the arms to a 'T' position, and then draw the knees to the chest. As you exhale, release the legs to the left. Hold for a few breaths, then repeat on the other side

Shavasana (Relaxation Pose): Savour the deep cleansing and uplifting after affects of Chakrasana with a few minutes in this pose.

Important note: Avoid practicing a deep forward bend after an intense back bend as this can create stress in the structures of the spine.

Conclusion

One's attitude in yoga practice is

paramount. Remember, with asana practice it is not only what you are doing, it is how you are doing it. Stay attentive and receptive to the process, rather than being attached to the destination. Be inquisitive rather than acquisitive in your exploration of the Wheel Pose. While steadily applying yourself to the steps into the pose, be content where you are in the now, rather than basing your happiness on a future goal.

After coming down and doing a counter pose from your practice of the asana, sit up in a meditation posture. Close the eyes and feel the after affects vibrating through the body. Draw the awakened energy from the skin inward. Coax the energy into the heart centre. Can you feel an inner smile expanding in your heart?

Paramahansa Yogananda emphasised that to be successful on this path of life, we need to be even-minded and cheerful at all times. With this attitude, we can be joyful and contented, regardless of what is happening externally.

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Adam and Akash Bornstein are the founders of Radiant Light Yoga. They are dedicated to sharing their experience and love of yoga with sincere students. For more information about classes, workshops, and teacher training visit www.radiantlightyoga.com