

Reinventing the Wheel

The future looks bright from Urdhva Dhanurasana...especially when you take the time to find optimal alignment

By Kristin McGee

As autumn shifts into winter, it's common to feel a little down. Shorter, darker days, dropping temperatures, and holiday anxiety are enough to throw a damper on your emotions. Look at someone who's down or depressed: shoulders round forward; chest cavity caves in; head tends to sink; eyes are downcast; and the heart region collapses. The mind echoes the body, so if the body is compressed, the mind is depressed.

One of my favorite yoga teachers calls backbends the antidepressants of yoga. To invite joy into your life, open through your chest, lift your gaze to eye level, and let your head float naturally on top of your spine. Try shifting your posture like this now, and notice how you automatically feel more present,

alive, and happy—and better able to breathe.

Full Wheel (Urdhva Dhanurasana) is one of the best poses to lift your spirits. A full backbend is the truest expression of an open heart. When you find the optimal alignment, you maintain a bright outlook and sense of well-being. Your legs and arms help you anchor in the present, and you feel alive and happy just where you are.

Child's view

By doing backbends and opening my heart, I feel young again. Many of my students say, "I used to get right up into a Wheel when I was a kid...and now I can't." Urdhva Dhanurasana can be a big challenge and quite scary even; but with proper alignment,

you'll be looking forward to backbending in class or any time you need a quick pick-me-up.

At the recent Fit Yoga conference, I took an advanced workshop with Desirée Rumbaugh, an incredible Anusara teacher. In the past, I'd do Urdhva Dhanurasana by coming onto the crown of my head, then narrowing my elbows and rolling my triceps in toward the midline before pressing up. While it is important to narrow your elbows, I'd often end up jamming them and narrowing my shoulder girdle so much my heart would actually collapse rather than blossom.



TAKE THE WHEEL

To experience this for yourself, first warm up with poses such as three to five Sun Salutations as well as King Arthur pose, a deep presser stretch where you're in a lunge position with your back shin up a wall and your foot to the outside of your hip. First, bring your lower back toward the wall; you'll feel a deep stretch in the front of your thigh and hip flexor. After 5-8 deep full breaths, lunge your front foot forward more and press your hips forward, keeping your tailbone heavy and your front hip rim lifting; you'll now get a deeper stretch in your groins and psoas muscles. To open the shoulder and chest region, reach your arms overhead, arch back, and reach for the wall behind you.

For your Urdhva Dhanurasana:

- Lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor directly beneath your bent knees.
- Bring your hands next to your ears, fingers turned toward the shoulders, and press yourself onto the crown of your head.
- Lift your heels, and make sure your feet are parallel. To keep the internal rotation in your legs, imagine your inner thighs are hugging a basketball.
- Start to walk your hands closer to your feet and feel your shoulder blades coming around your spine, creating a lift in the chest region.
- Walk in as comfortably as you can and then use your arms and legs to press all the way up into a full Wheel.
- Once you're up, lower your heels—you may be in a deeper backbend than you've ever been before.
- Now, keeping the inner spiral of your thighs, begin externally rotating your arms while keeping an open heart.
- Hold for at least five full breaths. I personally like to do a series of three wheels in a row and hold each one for 5 to 8 breaths.
- To come out of the pose, bend your elbows, suck your chin, and slowly lower. Do not immediately hug your knees into your chest until you've rezed (with feet together, knees apart) for a few breaths.

Desirée had us come onto the crown of our heads while we stayed on the balls of our feet (to ease low back pressure), and then widen our elbows and walk our hands closer to our feet (see photo at left), as we


hugged our shoulder blades around our spine to broaden the chest region. We walked in until our noses were almost on the floor as we continually hugged our shoulders together. Pressing up, I felt my shoulder blades come toward each other and my heart open more than it ever has. And I could straighten my arms without over-locking my elbows. I felt as if my heart were being held in my shoulder blades and lifted upward. It was an incredible experience.

A change in perspective

Although I've always been a deep backbender, I'd arch more from my mid-back and lower-back region, whereas now I felt my upper back and chest opening. I began to discover what Urdhva Dhanurasana truly feels like, and I could actually walk my hands even closer to my feet and create one giant circle of energy. Once you find that, the explosion of love and joy spreads like rapid fire through your body.

While I realize that sometimes people do need medication if they are clinically depressed (due to a childhood eating disorder, I've taken antidepressants), I also know that yoga has been the best therapy for me. I can live drug-free today because I've found a way to connect to my body, mind, and spirit, and I no longer shy away from my emotions. Feelings come and go—it's natural to be happy at some times and to get down every now and then.

Yoga allows us to witness our ever-changing emotions and then to take action. We can choose to see things however we wish, as opposed to reacting mindlessly. When we let our emotions rule, we feel victimized and out of control.

Next time you feel yourself spiraling downward, lift your chest, open your heart, and see how things shift. Or do a backbend. Then, take a deep breath and realize you're the one at the wheel. Now steer yourself forward with a positive outlook and a sense of joy in your heart. 

Kristin McGee has been teaching yoga and Pilates in Manhattan for the past 13 years. She is the star and host of MTV's yoga and Pilates series as well as her self-produced Power Yoga and Bendin'! Yoga DVDs. For more information on Kristin or if you have a pose you'd like a tip for, email her through her website www.kristinmcpge.com