

Posture Perfecter

Take aim at rounded shoulders with Dhanurasana ~ Carol Krucoff



Indian mythology is rich with references to the bow (*dhanu* in Sanskrit), a simple stringed weapon that enables a steady and skilled archer to defeat an enemy. The pose *Dhanurasana* extends the body back into the shape of a bow as the arms reach back straight and taut, forming the “string” of the asana. Done properly, *Dhanurasana* is a superb back strengthener that can help vanquish the postural enemy of rounded shoulders. Arching the body backward opens the chest and provides a powerful stretch for the front of the shoulders and the quadriceps—a wonderful antidote to all the time we spend “crunched” forward in daily life. Regular practice of this pose helps keep the spine flexible and counters the tendency to slump forward.

Like all other backbends, Dhanurasana is dynamic and energizing—stretching the front body increases the flow of blood to the digestive tract and enhances the efficiency of the stomach, liver, and intestines, while contracting the back body stimulates the kidneys and adrenals. But it can be so invigorating that if you suffer from insomnia, you should not practice it late in the day.

Mind the Back

Dhanurasana enhances the back-strengthening and chest- and abdomen-stretching effects of the other prone (belly down) backbends—such as *Bhujangasana* (Cobra) and *Salabhasana* (Locust)—which are often used as preparatory poses. Although catching the feet or ankles integrates the posture, it can also compress the back. For this reason, it’s important to create space between the vertebrae and to stay as relaxed as possible while you’re in the pose. You can also modify *Dhanurasana* by reaching the arms back without catching the ankles or by using a strap. So start with the modified versions and stay with them as long as you need to. Don’t worry about catching the ankles if this puts pressure on your knees or lower back. Remember that the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*—the classic guide compiled around the second century BCE—states that a yoga asana should have two qualities: *sthira* and *sukha*, which are generally translated as “steadiness” and “ease.” If you don’t feel steady and at ease in this pose, or any other, back off to easier versions until you do. Challenge yourself but don’t strain. You do not have to catch your feet or ankles to gain great benefit.

Warm the Body

Since *Dhanurasana* provides an intense stretch of the shoulders, spine, and thighs, warm up these areas properly. Begin in *Balasana* (Child’s Pose) with arms extended forward, and bring awareness to the lower back, breathing into your back ribs and dropping your hips toward your heels. Release head, arms, and shoulders. On an inhalation, come onto all fours. Then, on an exhalation, stretch back to *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). Inhale back to all fours and exhale to *Balasana*, repeating this series of linked poses five or six times, synchronizing the movements with your breath.

Then move into *Anjaneyasana* (Crescent Pose) to open up the front of your thighs. From Downward Dog, step your right foot forward between your hands, with the toes in line with your fingertips. Bring your hands to your hips and drop your pelvis down so that your front knee bends forward, tracking directly over your toes. Add a shoulder stretch by clasping your hands behind your back—keep a “micro-bend” in the elbows—and bring your clasped hands up away from your tailbone. Then bring your



hands back to the floor on either side of your foot, and step into Downward Dog. Repeat the lunge on the other side.

Look, Ma, No Hands

Before trying to “string” Bow Pose with your arms, practice a preparatory version that doesn’t require catching the ankles. Lie face-down with your legs hip-width apart and your arms by your sides, palms down. Bend your knees so that your shins are perpendicular to the floor, then lift the soles of your feet skyward. Exhale completely. On an inhalation, lift your head, shoulders, and upper back as high as you comfortably can as you keep your neck long by extending through the crown of your head.

Stay there, and as you exhale, move your feet up toward the sky. Don’t worry if your thighs don’t lift very far off the floor; just do the best you can. Stay here for two or three breaths, continuing to lift your upper body and feet. Keep length in your lower back by sending breath into the back waist. Then release and relax.

One Bow at a Time

Some people can clasp one ankle but not both—either from tightness in the quadriceps or shoulders or from a knee problem. The Half Bow variation offers the experience of the complete, integrated pose on one side. Once you’re comfortable creating the basic shape of the pose with no hands, try Half Bow.

To come into Half Bow, lie on your belly with both of your arms extended forward. Bend your right knee, reach your right arm back, and take hold of your right ankle. Flex your right foot and, on an inhalation, move your right heel away from your buttock, using this action to help you lift your head and right shoulder off the floor and bow your body back as much as is comfortably possible. As you hold one

ankle, extend the other leg and arm, pressing them into the floor to help stabilize the pose. Hold for three breaths on each side. If you need extra cushioning under your hips, lay a folded blanket over your yoga mat.

Grab a Strap

Another helpful modification for Bow Pose is to use a strap. Place the strap on one end of your mat where your shins will rest and curve it into a U shape. Lie face-down on the mat, making sure that the strap is positioned under your shins, and take one end of the strap in each hand. Keeping the legs hip-width apart, bend your knees and flex your feet, moving the strap so that it rests on your ankles. Walk your hands down the strap so they are as close to your feet as possible.

Now, bring your heels toward your buttocks as you draw your abdominals in. Take a few breaths, extending your tailbone toward your knees and broadening the back of your pelvis. On an inhalation, “string the bow” by moving your shins away from your buttocks, letting this action draw your shoulders back and lift your head and chest off the floor. Focus on lifting your ribs and thighs off the floor, and ground yourself on your pubic bones and hip points. Flex your feet and lift the soles toward the ceiling so that your knees and as much of your thighs as possible are off the floor. Keep your neck long by extending the crown of the head toward the sky. Take your gaze upward, but don’t drop your head back—keep the neck long. If this bothers your neck, gaze forward, not up.

Bow Balance

After you’ve mastered practicing with a strap, you can safely try the full pose. At first, practice inhaling your body into a full bow and then exhaling it back down. When you are ready, inhale into the pose and



stay there for two to five breaths, continuing to lift your chest and feet skyward while staying rooted on your pubic bones and hip bones. Press the shins back into the hands to help lift the chest. As much as possible, keep length in your lower back by sending breath into your back waist and broadening the back of the pelvis. Feel the back of your rib cage widen as you inhale. When you can no longer feel the sensation of lengthening your spine with your breath, come out of the pose by releasing your ankles and relaxing down to the floor. Press back into Child's Pose to stretch out your back.

In the classic full pose, the legs are together, but this can be hard on the lower back, so let your legs open to a comfortable distance. Don't let them splay apart, however, because this can also compress the lower back. Instead, try to keep the legs parallel. Whichever version you're doing, remember to balance the effort needed to keep your bow taut, with the relaxation necessary to avoid compressing the back. Set your sights on maintaining steadiness and ease as you do your best to achieve your version of the pose. Don't worry about looking picture perfect. Instead, aim your Bow Pose toward feeling exhilarated and joyous.

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