

## master class

by Leigh Ferrara  
with Laura Christensen

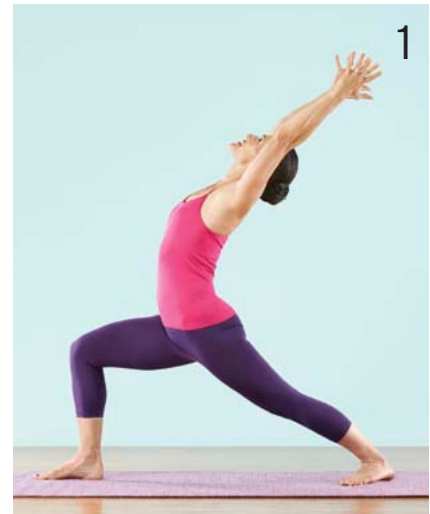
# get a lift | Tap into the power of your breath for a confident, buoyant Camel Pose.

**WHEN YOU ENTER A CHALLENGING POSE** like Ustrasana (Camel Pose), you need all the inner and outer strength you can get. If you lack the confidence or strength to lean back into it, says Laura Christensen, a San Francisco Bay Area yoga teacher, you'll likely flop into the pose and take the brunt of the backbend in your neck or lower back. The first step toward resolving this problem is to tune in to your breath, since the breath is a way to harness and direct the prana (life force) that's within each of us. "It's difficult to feel confident and trust yourself if you don't feel powerful inside or if you are cut off from the very energy that enlivens you," she says. "Each of us contains within an incredible wellspring of power, but it's not always activated, and we don't always feel it."

Breathing with awareness not only helps you tap into your inner strength but also helps keep you stable in the places you need it most. Christensen compares the action of filling the torso with breath to filling a balloon with water: When there's no water in the balloon, it's floppy. The water gives it shape and form. Similarly, when you fill the torso with breath, it expands the circumference of your pelvis, waist, lower and upper rib cage, upper back, and chest. As the ribs expand, the spine elongates, which is an essential first step for backbending safely.

Exhalations lend a different set of benefits. If you're tight or tense before moving into the pose, the tendency is to jut the lower ribs out; the first few exhalations soften the back and chest muscles, allowing your lower ribs and internal organs to move toward the back of the body. Then you begin pushing all of the air out until you feel a slight contraction of your deepest abdominal muscles. You'll know you're working the breath properly when you're able to keep the lower back long and you feel as though you are lifting up and out of your pelvis as you backbend.

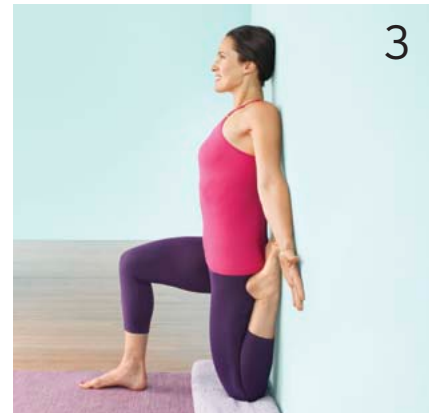
To lend even more support in the pose, Christensen advises using the gluteal and hamstring muscles to pull your thighbones back, which will help stabilize the sacrum and support the lower back. »



Move the back of your pelvis away from your ribs as you lift your heart toward the sky.



Connect to your internal power, noticing how your breath helps you sustain the pose.



Engage the gluteals and hamstrings to keep your thighbone and pelvis in alignment.



Inhale, soften your ribs, and widen the back of your whole body to keep the low back long.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL WINOKUR; MODEL: LAURA CHRISTENSEN; STYLIST: LYN HEINEKEN; HAIR/MAKEUP: ALISHA MEEK/AUBRI BALK INC.; TOP: NUX; BOTTOMS: DANSKIN; MAT: YOGASANA; BLANKET: BAREFOOT YOGA CO.