



# Yoga for Back Care

By Dr. Jason Cheng & Dr. Baxter J Bell

Weight loss, increased flexibility, outstanding sexual performance or just creating a focused state of being, yoga delivers each of these benefits and can be done by nearly anyone. Perhaps the greatest quality about yoga is that it is a single-minded discipline with various assets to those who practice it.

## Back Yoga

Considering that back problems are the leading cause of physical disability in our industrialized world, *anybody who has back concerns*, ranging from a 70-year old grandmother to the 14-year old soccer player can benefit from these series of exercises to help strengthen the back. Though the principles of why they work delve into the complicated system of Hatha yoga, the benefits received of strength, flexibility and controlled breath can be easily grasped by even the beginner.



### 1. Breathing Exercise:

As you lie on your back, place a small light block or box on your tummy, and close your eyes and slowly breathe, focusing on elevating as you inhale, and lowering the block as you exhale. Find a comfortable rhythm of breathing as the block rhythmically elevates and lowers.



*Repeat for 8 breaths.*

### 2. Preparatory Arm Stretch:

Lie on your back with one knee flexed. Concentrate on calm breathing, with the lower part of your back in contact with the floor.



### 3. Arm Swings:

As you inhale, slowly raise your arms by your sides over your head as if you were reaching over your head. As

you inhale, slowly bring your hands back to your sides by your waist.

*Repeat for 6 breaths on each side.*



#### **4. Preparation for Leg bends:**

Now turn around and lie completely face down.



#### **5. Leg Bends:**

As you inhale from this position, slowly bend your leg towards your buttocks. As you exhale, lower your leg back to the ground. As you do this exercise, you may feel a stretching sensation across your quadriceps muscle.

*Repeat this 6 times alternating legs.*



#### **6. Preparation for Lifted Leg stretch:**

From this same prone position (lying face down), place your hands in a “push-up” position. Your elbows should be bent, but relaxed with your palms face down on the floor.



#### **7. Cobra Pose with Leg bend**

From the lying cobra position with palms facing down, slowly bend one leg up while lifting the head and neck up simultaneously. Then slowly release the pose back to a lying cobra. Do this for 4 times, and then switch sides.



## 8. Relaxation:

Distribute your weight evenly, allowing your hands, shoulder blades, pelvis, hips, all symmetrically contact the ground. Feel the sense of your natural curves, noting where you naturally contact the ground and where you naturally don't. Those with low back pain frequently are unable to have the low back contact the ground.

*Rest and observe for a minimum of 2 minutes.*



## 9. Lateral Leg Bend:

Lie on one side with your lower leg bent slightly behind you, and the upper leg straight over on top. Focus on aligning your body straight so that your hip bones are on top of each other, and not tilted. Your lower arm should be relaxed straight out over your head, while the upper arm rests in front of your body.



## 10. Lateral Leg Raise:

From this same position with your arms stabilizing your torso, inhale and raise the upper leg slightly towards the air. Feel the stretch of your upper leg as you inhale. As you exhale, slowly drop your lower leg back to the starting position.

*Repeat 6 times alternating legs.*



## 11. Repeat Relaxation Pose for another 2 minutes



### 12. Neutral Cat:

While on all fours, feel the weight of your torso supported on your hands and feet. Lengthen your body from your head to your tailbone. As you breathe, feel the stretch along each of your vertebrae from head to tail. Make sure to keep your head and your entire spine along one stretched line.



### 13. Purring Cat:

As you exhale from the neutral cat, push your shins into the ground, lengthen and deepen your groins and raise your tailbone into the sky. Feel your lower back arch into a back bend, and extend your upper chest forward with your neck and head arching skyward. During this motion feel your upper chest wall expand and open, symbolic of you presenting your heart and soul with full surrender.



### 14. Angry Cat:

While exhaling from Neutral Cat, press your hands and feet, dropping your tailbone between your legs as you hollow your belly. Curl your head downward and back towards your tailbone, and expand your back. Press your arms downward into the ground to draw your wide, hollow chest into your back.

*Inhale and return back to Neutral Cat.*

*Repeat this sequence: Neutral—Purring—Neutral—Angry—Neutral 3 times.*



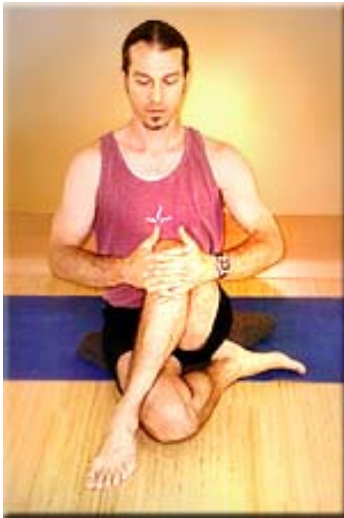
### 15. Sitting Meditation:

With your legs crossed, alternate crossing one shin over another. Bring your knees close enough together so that your legs form a square. Make sure that you are comfortable enough for your hands to fall on your thighs with the palms face up. Feel a release down the back of

your shoulder blades and close your eyes as you concentrate on the motion of each breath.

**Modification:**

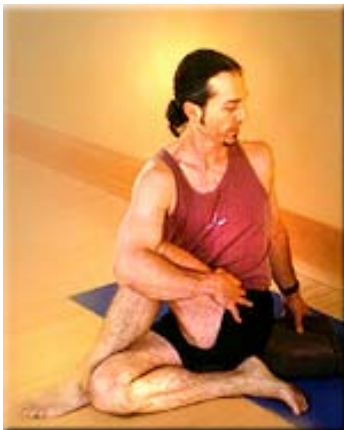
If your legs and hips are too tight, consider sitting on a block or a folded blanket that is high enough to allow your pelvis to be upright. Or you may choose to sit with your back to the wall, as this will help you focus on proper alignment of your shoulder blades, sacrum and your pelvic bones.



**16. Preparation for Lord of the Fishes:**

Here we feature our yoga expert, Baxter Bell showing us the Lord of the Fishes pose:

Sit with the lower leg crossed under and the upper leg crossed over. Place the sole of one foot passed over the knee of the lower crossed leg. While doing this, place your hands on your knee pulling the leg back into a compressed position.



**17. Lord of the Fishes:**

As you exhale, rotate your upper body away from the crossed legs, utilizing one hand to support your back, and the other arm to push the upper leg away from the twist. You should feel a gentle releasing feeling with this twist as the lower leg and the upper quadriceps stretch.

As with sitting meditation, if you have difficulty stretching, try sitting on a blanket or a block.

*Hold for 1-2 minutes.*

**18. Advanced Lord of the Fishes:**

If you are daring enough, reach your crossed arm underneath your thigh and pull your back arm around you to increase the amount of stretch. Marvel as our expert Baxter does this effortlessly!

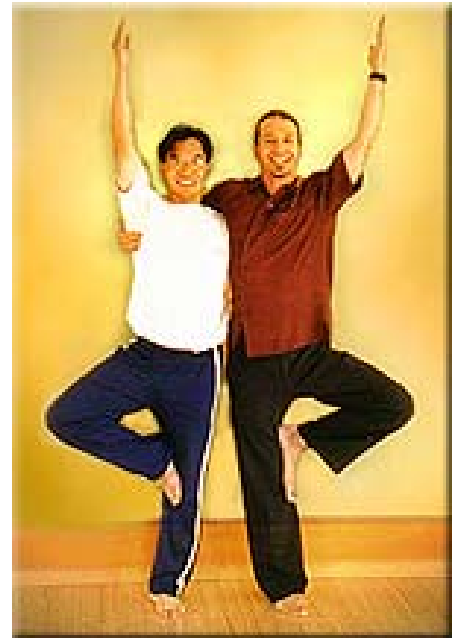


Whether you do these exercises twice a day, or twice a week, the key to these exercises is **consistency and focus**. You are not on a race, and not suppose to strain yourself in anyway. As with all yoga exercises, the concentration on "prana" or breathing is paramount to the movements.

The exercises are a "prescription" of exercises from my visit to Baxter Bell, MD, a yoga instructor who is a partner of Rodney Yee, of the Gaiam yoga video series. As a graduate of the Advanced Studies Program under the directorship of Rodney Yee, Baxter craftily integrates elements of conventional medicine, Chinese acupuncture, and of course Hatha yoga creating a cornucopia of back healing exercises.

Namaste,

Jason Cheng, DO



**Dr. Baxter and Dr. Jason  
practicing what they preach!**



#### *About Dr. Jason:*

*Dr. Jason is a D.O. (Doctor of Osteopathy--see below) and is currently completing his specialty training in anesthesiology and rehabilitative pain management. He is an active health educator in the entertainment and performing arts community, having treated and educated individuals coast to coast. In addition to educating and treating performers from the Disneyland resort in Southern California all the way out to dancers on Broadway, he is also a medical speaker and consultant at South Baylo University, (the largest university devoted to Chinese medicine and acupuncture), and has been an online health consultant since 1998.*

#### *About Dr. Baxter J Bell*

*Baxter J. Bell, MD, RYT500, is a Board Certified Family Physician and medical acupuncturist, practicing in the Oakland, CA area, as well as a long time Hatha Yoga Practitioner and yoga teacher. He completed the Advanced Studies 2000 Program at the Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, under the directorship of Rodney Yee. Baxter teaches public classes and well as specialty Back Care yoga classes in Northern California, leads yoga retreats in N.CA, and has taught around the US and in Cuba. He has been a contributing writer for Yoga Journal Magazine and the International Journal of Yoga Therapy. He appears on the recently released Yoga Journal DVD "Yoga for Back Care" with Rodney Yee.*