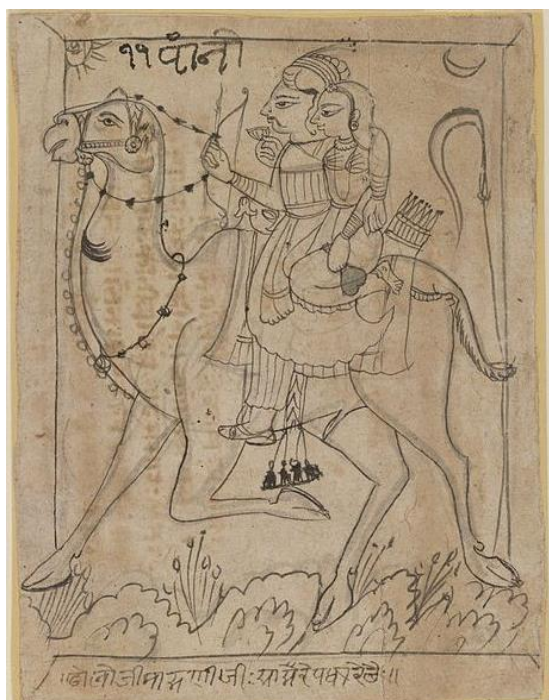


The Camel - Ustrasana



¹ Ustrasana is mentioned in the Gheranda Samhita:

'Lie on the ground face downwards, turn up the legs and place them towards the back, catch the legs with the hands, contract forcibly the mouth and the abdomen. This is called the Camel posture.'

(GS, 2, 41)²

This description sounds more like Dhanurasana, or Bow pose, but both postures make the same shape though Ustrasana as we know it is perpendicular to the ground. As such it makes the shape of a camel's hump.

The camel is an amazing creature, capable of remarkable feats of endurance. Camels are famous for going long periods without drinking – up to ten days - and they can exist on just about anything. They are generally vegetarian but will eat meat and metabolise just about anything they can get their teeth on if necessary. Their physiology is different to any other animal: apart from their thick coat and eyelashes, they have a transparent third eyelid to protect them from any sand or grit that might lodge in their eyes; their brain-cooling system is quite sophisticated, involving close layering of arteries and veins; males are in possession of a weird balloon-like organ in their soft palate which lolls out like a second tongue when they feel the need to repel another male; their immune system is highly evolved; they mate sitting down, with the male behind the female; and the female ovulates once she is inseminated.

Camels are found in areas of desert such as Africa, Central Asia and Australia - and as such are particularly designed to withstand drought: their red blood cells are oval as opposed to circular, in order to prevent their rupturing when they drink large quantities of water (53 gallons in 3 minutes); their urine is unguent, their droppings are dry, and their humps, though they don't actually contain water, as is popularly believed, are composed of fatty mass which yields more than their bulk in water when necessary. They don't sweat, they retain

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_-_Maru_Ragini_\(Dhola_and_Maru_riding_on_a_Camel\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_-_Maru_Ragini_(Dhola_and_Maru_riding_on_a_Camel).jpg)

² The Gheranda Samhita, (1976) Philosophical Publishing House Ltd., London

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water in their nostrils even as they exhale and they lie down in such a manner as to aid heat-loss. They easily withstand extreme temperature changes and are built for endurance. As such they have been exploited by humans for ten to twelve thousand years.

Camels are used to this day as pack animals. Their meat has been eaten since ancient times and they were roasted whole in Persia. Their hair has been used for textiles and their milk drunk and made into cheese – palatable even to the lactose-intolerant. Camel milk has many wonderful properties and it is claimed that it cures diabetes.³ It has been drunk by the Bedouin people for centuries. Because camels thrive in difficult conditions they are vital to the developing countries which are fortunate enough to have them as domesticated inhabitants.

The camel is an even-toed ungulate. They do not have hooves but two toes which spread wide to accommodate unkind terrain. Their toes are bound by tough skin, especially on the sole, and a ball of fat pads out their heels.⁴ They walk with a pacing gait, which means that they move the two right legs together and then the two left legs together – though this changes when they run – at a gallop and never at a trot. They can run over short distances for up to forty miles an hour, though camels race over distances at about twenty five miles per hour.

Camels are referenced in all the ancient texts, from the Vedas to the Bible. Famously they ferried the Magi to the birth of Christ, and the Mahabharata mentions them – but generally they are beasts of burden and not valued like cattle or revered like cows. They have always been subjected to outrageous demands by humans – and yet they retain a certain dignity. The more one investigates camels, the more paradoxical they become, combining a haughty expression with dribbling lips, the dignified and graceful neck off-set by an almost constant tendency to break wind.

The Camel Posture itself is a paradox: why is it that a posture which can only be held for thirty seconds to a minute is named after an animal famous for its endurance? Is it because that to ride a camel one has first to clamber on its back and then, as the camel lumbers to its feet, throw oneself back in a manner resembling Ustrasana whilst gripping firmly with the knees ...?

‘Ustra’ means ‘Camel’, and steady practice brings its own rewards. Though it is challenging in the beginning, it becomes more and more enlightening with practice. It is a posture which is a direct contradiction to our twenty first century life-style: it opens up the front part of the body, the part which is

³ <https://www.organicfacts.net/health-benefits/animal-product/camel-milk.html>

⁴ <https://animals.mom.me/camels-hooves-it-6771.html>

usually contracted, thereby opening the diaphragm, giving space to the internal organs, strengthening the spine, stabilising the pelvis, and allowing one to glimpse the whole spine on trial. It is a posture which encourages Svadhyaya, or self-study: by reminding ourselves of the elegant poise and inbuilt beauty of a camel's neck we can, when we do this posture, align ourselves with that within us which is most graceful and truly aligned to endurance and fabulous, understated autonomy.

Of course, we must also always be mindful of Ahimsa: The lumbar spine and neck are at particular risk to the heedless in the Camel. By paying attention to the lumbar spine and by supporting it through attention to breath and muscle; and by considering the contrast between the short-spaced vertebrae of a human and the elegant curves of a camel's neck - we can develop a meaningful alliance between strength and flexibility whose benefits out-run the short space of time we are actually in the posture. By regular practice of Ustrasana we do indeed cultivate the spirit of endurance and paradoxical mystery which is at the heart of this wonderful posture.

And indeed the heart opens, the inner sun shines – and our range of possibility is immeasurably increased. Camels are affectionate and intelligent, responding to kindness and cruelty with measured justice. And so is the Ustrasana an incredibly beneficial asana. It can be adapted to most physical limitations and health conditions - as long as it is complemented with mindful counter-poses. For, like all back-bends, it can stoke the inner fire too much if practised without wisdom. People can become angry and agitated if they practise Ustrasana too much or too fiercely – or expansive, generous and enlightened.

Robyn Davidson says of camels in his book Tracks:

'They are the most intelligent creatures I know except dogs and I would give them an IQ rating roughly equivalent to eight-year-old children. They are affectionate, cheeky, playful, witty, yes witty, well-possessed, patient, hard-working, and endlessly interesting and charming. They are also very difficult to train, being of an essentially undomestic turn of mind as well as extremely bright and perceptive. This is why they have such a bad reputation. If handled badly, they can be quite dangerous and recalcitrant.'

Practise as you would like to train your inner camel: with awareness, attention and love.