

CHAPTER FIVE

BACKBENDING POSTURES

The next three chapters bring us to the heart of hatha yoga—to postures that involve backbending, forward bending, and twisting. Of these three, backbending is the logical place to begin our discussion because it is relatively simple. But the two categories of backward bending and forward bending postures form a pair: the muscles that resist the bend in one category are the same muscles that pull us into the bend in the other category, and we need to see and understand them in reference to one another. To keep the comparisons in perspective this chapter will be about 90% backbending and 10% forward bending, and the next chapter will be about 90% forward bending and 10% backbending.

The plan here will be to first sum up the possibilities for forward and backward bending in the standing position, concentrating on limitations in the hip joints and lower back, and then to build on our discussion of the vertebral column by examining the spinal limitations to backbending in more detail. Next, we'll look at the relationships between breathing and backbending, and finally we'll turn to the myriad forms of backward bending in hatha yoga, beginning with the famous prone backbending postures—the cobra, locust, boat, and bow—and continuing with more specialized postures such as the fish, the wheel, and the camel. Two more backbending postures, the arch and the bridge, are traditionally part of the shoulderstand series and will be deferred to chapter 9.

Figure 5.12. In the advanced cobra, highly flexible students can bend their lumbar spines 90° and touch their feet to their head. For most students spinal and hip inflexibility (along with resistant hip flexors and superficial abdominal muscles) limit coming fully into this pose.

