

Working Towards Wheel Pose



A Series of
Basic Yoga Poses
Designed to Make
Learning Wheel Pose
Easier

Neil Keleher

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For my Mother.

Love you mum!

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Driving Lessons for Your Body

The following set of exercises was driven by the desire to help my students learn to feel their body.

A lot of the people I was dealing with were beginners and some had difficulty with using their arms in strength based moves like push ups and wheel pose. But some didn't know even more basic actions like twisting and bending the spine.

So I worked on ways to make learning (and teaching) these actions easier.

- Part of that involved using instructions to direct awareness while doing these exercises.
- Another part involved isolating and clearly defining actions that could be put together to make doing the poses easier.

It is the sensitivity and control developed during these exercises that are the essence of learning to drive your body.

As an example, while driving, you look at the road to see where it is going. And you also look at the road so that you know when to turn and when to stop. You also sense what is on the road.

And that is perhaps the most salient point.

What is on the road is constantly changing. Cars, motorcycles, pedestrians, buses, trucks, taxis, roller-bladers, dogs, cats, birds, construction, low flying airplanes, ambulances, fire trucks, police officers, school children, nude models.

Any of these can make an appearance on or near the road and affect the flow of traffic.

The more aware you are of these the better chance you have of being able to respond as required.

Being able to control the car, slowing down, going faster, steering around obstacles, is what allows you to respond.

With sensitivity and responsiveness you can get to where you are going.

And it is also sensitivity and responsiveness or control that can get you there faster, (and more efficiently) if that is your desire.

Enjoying the Journey as well as the Destination

Driving lessons for your body help you better feel and control your body so that you can get it to where you want it to go (or do) in whatever manner you like.

If you take these lessons to heart you might just enjoy the process of learning to drive and you might actually find that you enjoy your body while actually driving it.

You can become the equivalent of an F1 driver and drive it to its utmost, or you can develop a similar skill level while enjoying the drive at any speed.

The focus in these driving lessons is on feeling your body and controlling it.

And what ties those things together, what unifies them is knowing what you are trying to do.

Practice Knowing... Little Bits at a Time

With the exercises in this drivers manual, you can practicing knowing what you are doing little bits at a time.

It's a little bit like when I learned to ride a motorbike. Not the first time where I crashed, but the second time when I actually took lessons. The first thing we did was push each other around while we learned to steer and use the brakes.

Then we learned how to clutch control. Then we practiced steering and braking while in first gear.

Eventually we put all those skills together, but only after we could do them without having to think about how to do them.

This ability to do without thinking can lead to a state of mind called flow. And that is actually a large part of the reason for learning to feel your body. The more you can feel the less you have to think about. Instead you can just respond.

Take Your Time Learning

Take your time with the exercises.

They don't have to be perfect but you should be able to do them without wondering what it is that you are trying to do.

When you know what you are trying to do then you can focus on doing it while at the same time feeling your body.

Then you can slowly start putting these individual actions together in the context of a yoga pose or any other action that you choose to do.

Essential Elements of Learning

Here are some of the essential elements of learning to drive your body.

Create Length

If ever you are stuck for what to do in a yoga pose, then one thing you can always fall back on is creating length in your body, least of all in your spine.

More often than not my reference for lengthening the spine is the pelvis. Move the ribs away from the pelvis. then move the head away from the ribs.

If you have trouble with this then practice by repeatedly lengthening and then relaxing.

Use Clear References

Use clearly defined references.

As an example, if you are trying to lengthen the spine then you can try lifting the ribs and moving the head upwards. However, these instructions work only in an upright situation.

An equivalent instruction set could include “moving the ribs away from the pelvis” and “moving the head away from the ribcage.”

In the first instance the pelvis is the reference. In the second instance the ribcage is the reference.

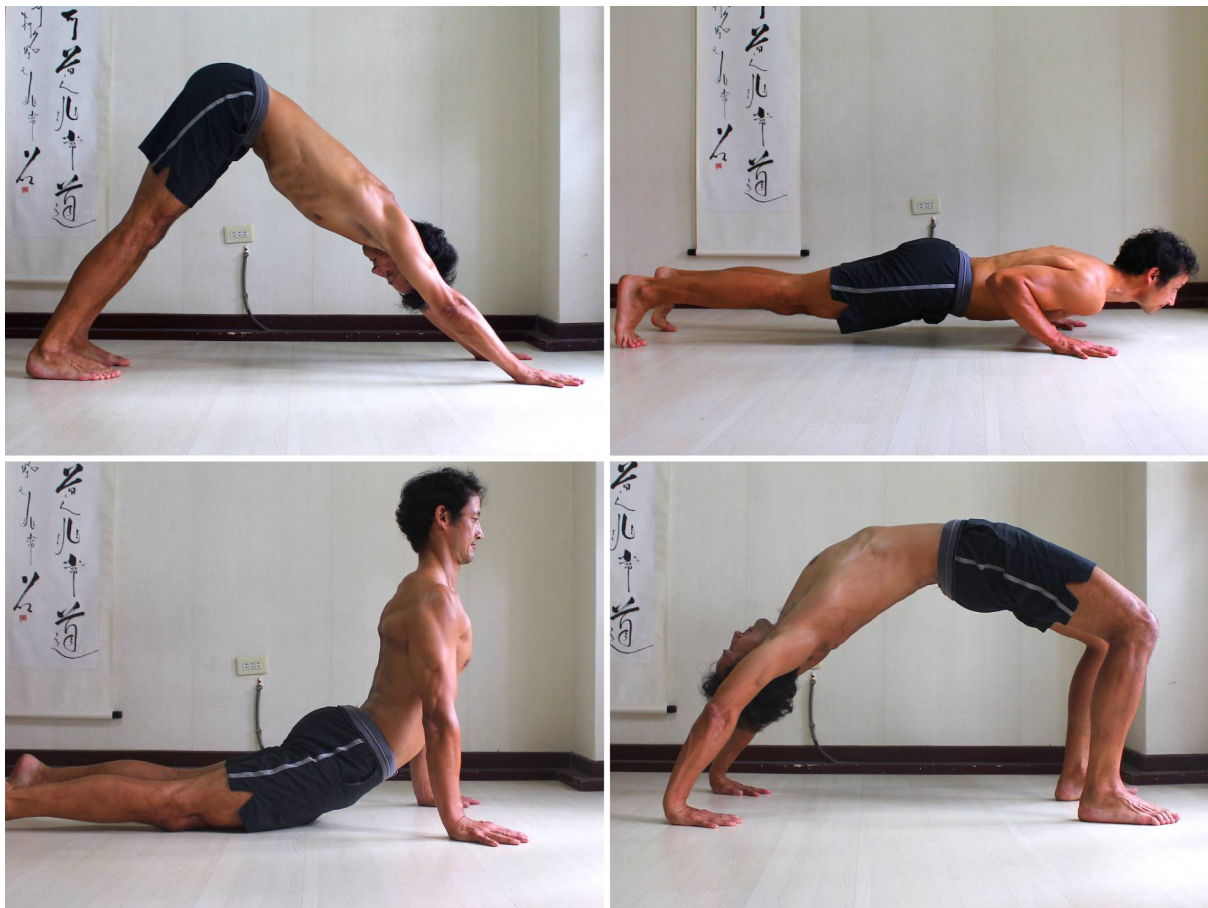
Clear references can help make movements easier to understand and do since they help you figure out in which direction you are trying to move the parts of your body.

Use The Ground Effectively

Another important part of this set of lessons is learning to use the ground.

The ground resists and that resistance is something we can learn to use to make doing yoga poses easier. It also provides a foundation for muscle actions that we can control and feel.

Covered in this book, the particular yoga poses where we can benefit from learning to feel and use the ground include downward dog, chaturanga dandasana, upward dog and wheel pose.



Poses where “Using and Feeling the Ground” can be helpful:

1. Downward Dog.
2. Chaturanga Dandasana.
3. Upward Dog.
4. Wheel Pose

Counterpose (For Balance)

Although the exercises can be done all in one go as a “yoga practice session” in the order given, I’ve included information on how you can pair these exercises together so that you can do those exercises in isolation and still finish with your body in a “balanced” state.

Some exercises don’t need a balancing counter pose, they are self balancing. But for those that aren’t I’ve included why two poses are balancing so that as your repertoire of poses increases you can figure out how to balance those poses or actions.

Ideally, with practice you’ll learn to feel your body (that is after all the goal) and you’ll notice how your body feels after each pose and after each workout.

You’ll begin to feel what your body needs without having to specifically think about counter poses.

But for now, do learn to think about and understand what poses balance each other.

Can you see why Downward Dog and Table Top Pose might be complimentary?



- Counterposes:
1. Down Dog
(Arms Up and Over the Head).
 2. Table Top Pose
(Arms “Behind the Back”)

One is the position of the arms. In downward dog the arms are “up and back.” In table top they are behind the back.

Also in downward dog the back of the hips are open. In table top the front of the hips are stretched.

Also, you could say that one faces upwards while the other faces downwards.

Direct Your Awareness

When doing the poses, or actions, direct your awareness.

Your body provides you with information, and if you look in the right places, think “gas gauge, speedometer, rev counter”, you can access that information.

As an example, when teaching balance poses a starting point can be feeling the point where you body contacts the earth. (You can then use that connection to feel where your center is.)

If lengthening the spine then focus on feeling the ribs and pelvis or head and ribcage.

Use Rhythm to Feel your Body

Most exercises will have a rhythm which can make doing them feel good.

That same repetitive rhythm is a chance for you to learn to feel your body and understand what it is telling you.

A hint that you’ve found the right rhythm is that you stop thinking or think less.

Notice Differences in Sensation

So that the exercises are easy learn and do they are broken down into steps.

Repeat the steps slowly and smoothly.

Each step is clearly defined, but also each step can be felt. So rather than blending them all together, first do each step, one after the other, clearly and distinctly and feel each step.

Feel the difference between each step. Then once you can feel the difference then work at combining those steps.

And that actually is a guide to how many repetitions you should do of each exercise. Practice until you get relatively smooth. Practice to the point where you can feel each step. And practice while it still feels good. Take rests when you need to.

Feel the Number of Repetitions

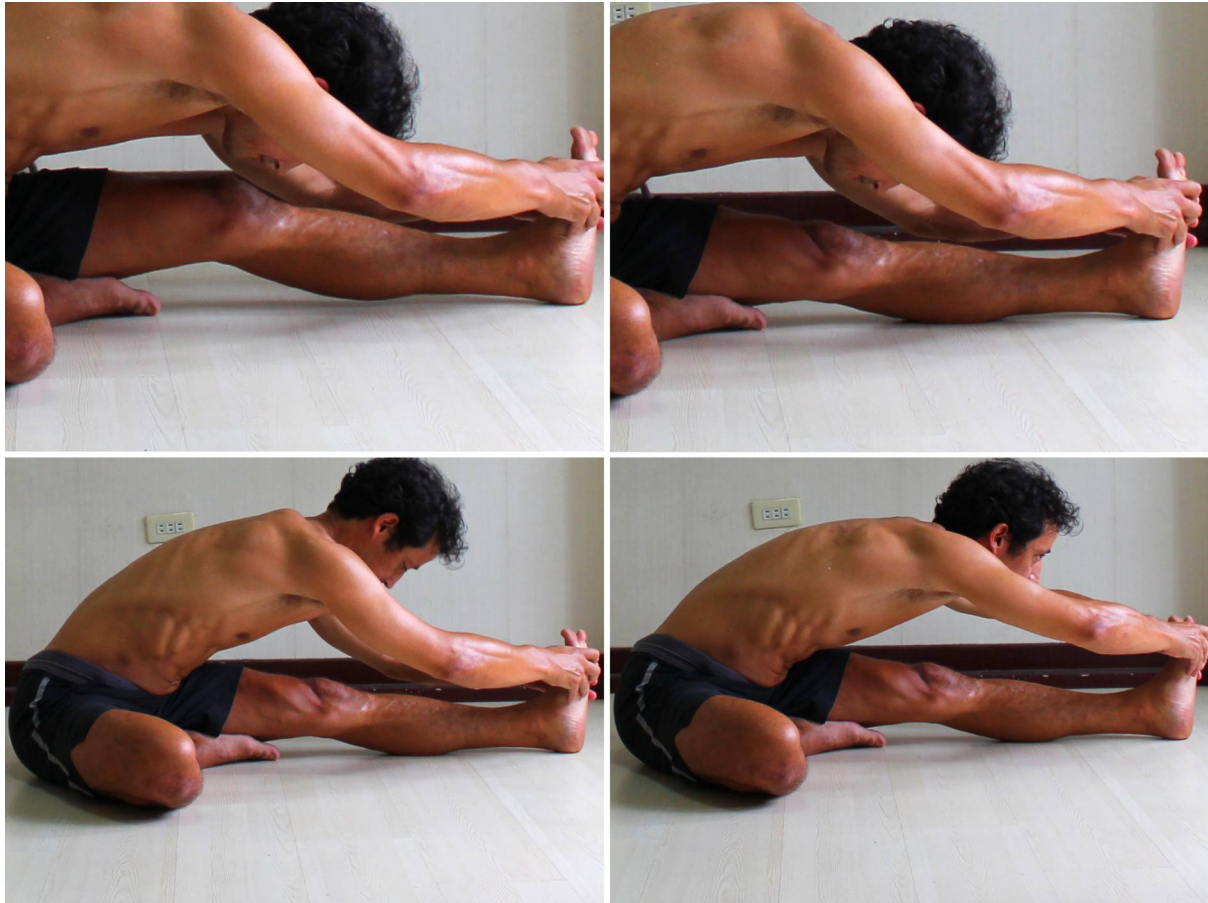
I rarely count sets or repetitions. I just stop when I’ve had enough or when I’m done. But if you are driven by the desire to count, the count. Do 3, 5 or 10 reps or more if you choose. And recognize when your body is telling you to stop.

Where there is the possibility to go deeper or higher, but you feel stuck on unable, work at gradually going deeper or higher. And rest when you need to.

Janu Sirsasana

The pose below is called Janu Sirsasana.

It's a forward bend (and so you could use a pose like Table Top as a counterpose since it is a backwards bending yoga pose.)



Janu Sirsasana Step By Step:

1. Relaxed.
2. Lengthen leg
(notice the smaller gap beneath the left knee.)
3. Lengthen spine.
4. Pull up on the leg with the arms.

The steps I often use to teach this pose, once the body is in the starting position are:

- Press the straight leg down,
- Lengthen the spine,
- Pull up with the arms,
- Relax and repeat.

Pressing the leg down can be done slowly and smoothly. And while doing so you can focus on feeling the leg. You can notice the bottom pressing into the earth or you can notice the muscle tension that causes the leg to press into the earth.

If you are not sure where that muscle tension comes from? Then practice pressing your leg down and then relax it. But do it slowly. Imagine crushing something beneath your thigh.

For myself I feel the tension in the back of the thigh. You may feel it somewhere different. You may also be able to “move” that tension.

For now just notice it as you activate and release.

As for **lengthening the spine**, well that’s actually one of the first exercises. Rather than going forward focus on reaching the ribs and head away from the pelvis. That’s one way to make your spine long.

As you move your ribs away from your pelvis can you feel the sides of your waist lengthen? If not, then practice activating and relaxing and see then if you can feel it lengthening. Likewise with your neck.

Pull your ear holes away from your shoulders to make your neck long. Or pull the back of your head away from your ribcage.

In both cases lengthen slowly and smoothly. Relax slowly and smoothly.

As for **pulling up with the arms**, grab onto the sides of the foot or the ankle, or use a towel or strap if you can’t reach.

Keep pressing down with the leg, keep the spine long, then use the arms to pull upwards on the foot or ankle.

Then **relax** and **repeat**.

While relaxing, let your ribcage slowly sink down with gravity. Relax your arms, relax your leg. Then smoothly repeat, press down with the leg, lengthen the spine, pull up with the arms.

You may notice that as you pull up with your arms your ribcage sinks down. And that’s the idea.

Integrate

Once you can feel each of the individual actions, then integrate them. Or try to vary them.

Going back to the Janu Sirsasana example: try lengthening the spine first, then press down with the leg then pull up with the arms.

What happens if you don’t press the leg down? What happens if you don’t lengthen the spine?

The better you are at feeling or sensing your body the better you can decide for yourself at any given time what is good to do and what isn’t.

It’s a little like driving a car when you know one of your tires is low on air. You drive slowly and carefully until you get to the gas station so that you can fill the tire up. But of course you had to notice the tire was low on air in the first place.

That’s where sensitivity and awareness comes into play.

Once you’ve played around with different ways of sequencing the steps, see if you can blend the steps together so that they turn into one smooth action. Practice this “integration” step, and if you have any problems, then isolate the problem area and practice it in isolation.

Then re-integrate.

Move Slowly and Smoothly to Prevent Injury

Ideally you don't get injured while doing yoga. One sure fire way (not guaranteed) of avoiding injury is to move slowly and smoothly... mindfully.

If you move slowly and smoothly you can feel if the movement is going to cause damage to your body. And you can stop before that damage occurs.

You can then see if you can figure out a way to do the movement that doesn't cause pain. Or you can leave a movement out and wait for your body to heal or seek outside expertise to figure out what the problem is and help you to fix it.

Continually Improve Sensitivity and Controllability

One benefit of being able to feel your body and control it is that you can work with greater efficiency and effectiveness. You can learn to use the minimum effort necessary to do what you are doing.

If you continually improve your sensitivity and control then you can continually reduce the effort with which you do things so that you can do with greater effortlessness.

It's one way of keeping life fresh and interesting.

Learn to Lengthen Your Spine

In any yoga pose, one thing that you can do is to lengthen the spine.

While lengthening, imagine that there is always room to lengthen it more. You can then occupy your senses (and your responses) by trying to find that room to lengthen.

Use the same mindset when relaxing. Relax your spine by letting the ribs sink down and the head move forwards. You then create the opportunity to lengthen again.

Using the Pelvis as a Reference.

Generally I use the pelvis as the first foundation or reference for lengthening the spine. I then lengthen the ribs away from the pelvis. My ribcage is then a second reference point. Move the head away from the ribcage.

You could also just focus on moving both head and ribcage away from the pelvis.

However if you focus on moving the ribcage away from the pelvis you can use this to specifically lengthen the waist. Then when you move your head away from your ribcage you can use that focus to lengthen the neck.

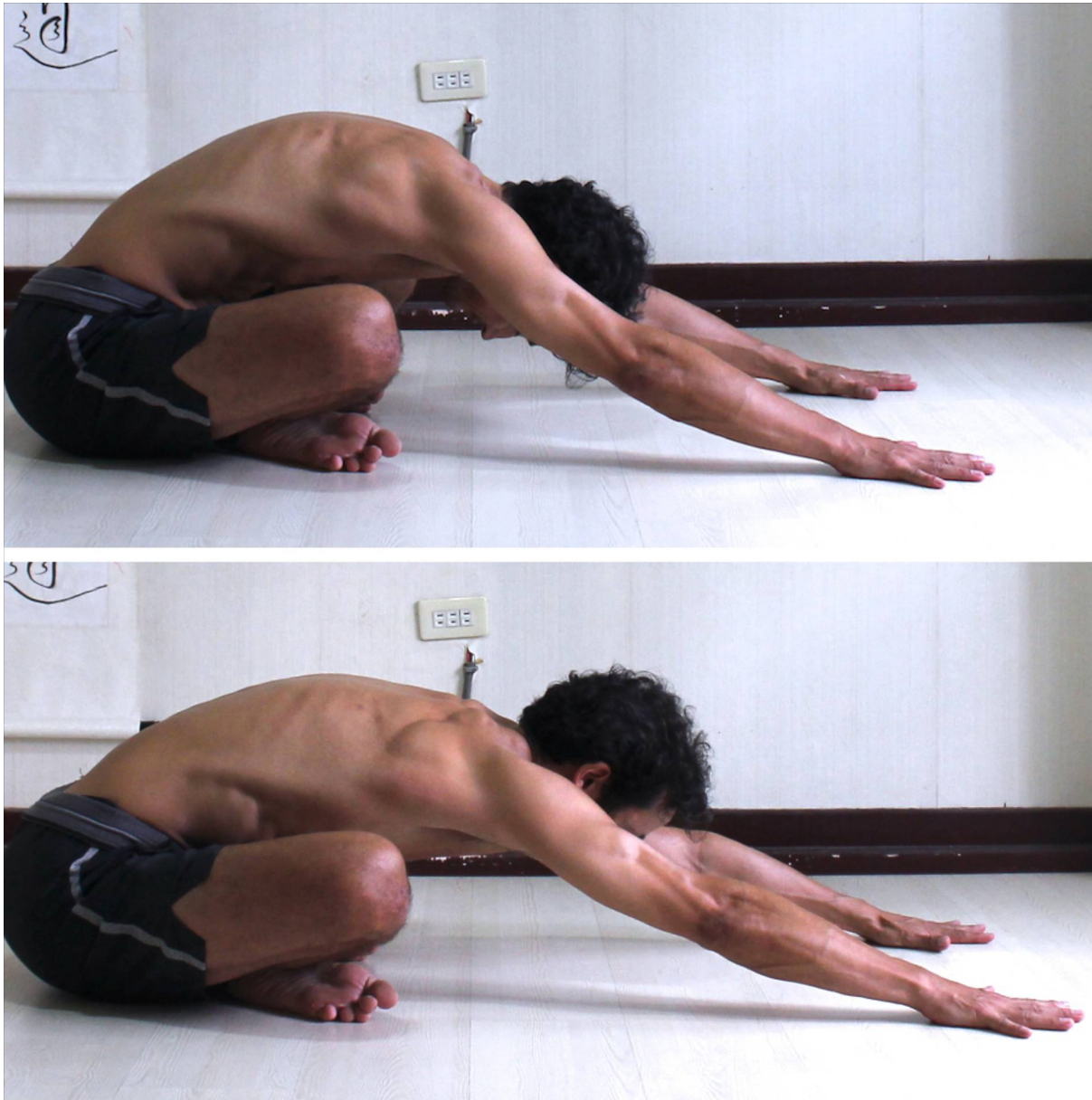
In either case the direction you are moving is clear.

So that it is then easier to lengthen your spine even when upside down, get used to the feeling of lengthening your spine. And also get used to the idea of switching references.

Being able to do both (feel your body, and switch references) gives a greater ability to handle new and interesting yoga poses effectively.

Cross Legged Forward Bend

In the Cross Legged Forward bend the intent is to make the spine and arms feel long.



Cross Legged Forward Bend:

1. Relaxed.
2. Reaching front ribs forwards, away from pelvis.
Reaching hands forwards, away from ribcage.

First focus on drawing the ribs away from the pelvis.

If you are more upright then you will be drawing your ribcage forwards and up. If you can bend forwards more, that can mean drawing the ribs more directly forwards.

You can then focus on drawing the ears away from the ribcage so that the neck is long.

To make the arms feel long, focus on reaching the hands away from the ribcage.

Hold the Length then Hold the Relaxation or...

In the above pose you can focus on gradually lengthening forwards for a minute. Then you can focus on relaxing. Let your arms bend. Let your head and ribcage sink down, also for a minute.

Another option, and this is the way I sometimes start, is to slowly lengthen then slowly relax and repeat. Use a repeated slow count of eight to slowly lengthen and slowly relax.

I have difficulty Bending Forwards!!!

What, you can't bend forwards? The main intent in this pose is lengthening the spine and arms. So if you can't bend forwards and lengthen then sit upright and lengthen upwards.

**Lengthening Spine and Arms Upwards:**

1. Relaxed.
2. Sitting up tall with front ribs lifted away from the floor and arms reaching upwards.
(Shoulders are lifted,
Elbows and fingers are straight.
Neck is long.)

Here again the pelvis, or even the floor, can be the main reference, Move ribs and head away from the pelvis, the lift the arms and reach the arms up away from the pelvis.

Fill your mind with the idea of reaching up. This is as opposed to the idea of “how much longer do I have to do this for.”

For this pose also you could gradually lengthen and hold or you can lengthen and relax repeatedly (but slowly.)

Some Tips on Making the Arms and Legs Feel Long

Most of use haven't spent the time to learn to feel our knees and elbows. If you have your elbows slightly bent, you can practice slowly straightening them and then bending them so that you can learn to feel when your elbows are straight. You can do the same with your knees.

If you practice moving and feeling your knees and elbows in isolation it's generally easier to then feel when your elbows and knees are straight without too much effort.

If we don't take the time to practice feeling elbows and knees then we may have the experience where we think they are straight but really they aren't.

If your knees and/or elbows are straight when the pose requires then you've got maximum length at those two places.