

basics

setu bandha sarvangasana

by Natasha Rizopoulos

Bridge Party

Build a Bridge and enjoy the many opening and strengthening benefits this pose offers.

SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA (Bridge Pose) is an amazingly versatile backbend that you can practice in a variety of ways, depending on what you want to achieve and how you use it in a sequence. The posture is potent by itself, but can also be a precursor to a range of postures with very different energetic benefits—from a heating, stimulating pose like Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose) to a cooling and calming pose like Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand).

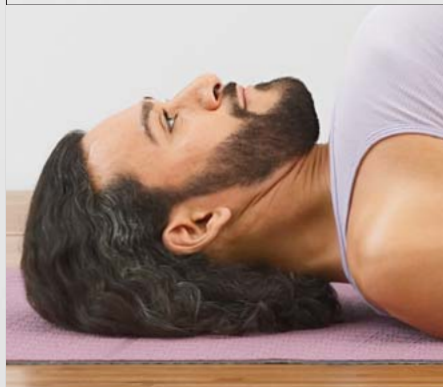
Bridge can be either a restorative posture (see “*Bridge to Your Practice*,” page 67) or a dynamic way to open and strengthen your body. It opens your thoracic spine (the middle and upper back) and imprints important alignment principles in your lower body that will serve you throughout your practice. Whether you are new to yoga or have been practicing for years, you can reap benefits from building a strong Bridge. As you play with the pose in its various incarnations, enjoy it as you would a new friend with whom you anticipate many years of fruitful and illuminating companionship. It won’t disappoint you.

Lift chest

Press outer shoulders and upper arms into the floor



DON'T Lose the natural curve of your neck.



DO Lift your shoulder blades into your chest.





Figure 2 (variation of Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) is described on page 66.

The first variation, which is one of my favorites, is a restorative version that will open your thoracic spine, teach you several important actions, and relax you on a muscular and an energetic level. You can use this setup outside class when you feel congested or tight in your upper back.

LIE BACK

Begin seated on your mat, with a pair of blocks placed behind you. Situate one block in the middle of the mat in a horizontal position (either flat or on its side) and another block parallel to the first, but closer to the top of the mat and in a more upright position (either on its side if your first block is flat, or at its most vertical if the first block is on its side). If you're petite or less flexible along your spine, try the two lower block positions, which will create a gentler backbend.

Next, release back onto the blocks, reaching behind with one hand so that you can adjust the blocks as you make contact with them. You will want the bottom block to end up beneath your

shoulder blades, with the lower edge of the block lined up with the lower border of your shoulder blades.

Once you've placed the first block, adjust the other block so that it supports the back of your head. It's in the right place when it feels stable enough that you're willing to relax back onto it rather than hold yourself up, which can create tension in your neck.

The block beneath your shoulder blades guides the shoulder blades to move up and into the chest, creating a bend in your middle and upper back, an area that's usually tighter than the rest of your spine. Because the blocks do the work, you can stay in this position longer than if you held the position on your own, so your body and mind assimilate and imprint the opening action.

When the blocks feel secure, externally rotate your arms so that the palms face the ceiling, and allow your upper arms to drop toward the floor (see figure 1). The rotation in the arms, along with the action in the shoulder blades, allows your trapezius

Pose Benefits

- Extends the thoracic spine
- Lengthens the hip flexors
- Strengthens the legs
- Opens the shoulders and chest
- Tones the upper-back muscles
- Calms the brain and eases anxiety

Contraindications

- Neck issues
- Lower-back sensitivity
- Some shoulder injuries

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muscles to soften and release down your back, counteracting the tightness that often accumulates during the day.

Next, extend your legs and let them fall open so they are externally rotated. Then release your inner thighs toward the floor so your quadriceps squarely face the ceiling, which creates a neutral rotation in the legs. Observe the difference between the two positions in terms of how your lower back feels. Externally rotated legs result in

Online Extra

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a narrowing across the lower back, which can compress the sacroiliac joints. A neutral rotation, on the other hand, broadens the lower back; this openness is critical to healthful backbending. Hold the pose for one to two minutes, depending on how comfortable you feel.

LIFT UP

For the next variation, shift the blocks to your lower body to learn valuable alignment lessons for your legs and feet (see figure 2). Begin lying on your back with your legs in the neutral position from the last round. Now bend your knees and plant your feet close enough to your buttocks that your knees stack over your heels. The position of the feet is very important in backbends. Check to see if your feet are hip-distance apart and parallel to each other; it's common to feel that your feet are parallel when they are actually turned out, and to feel that your feet are pigeon-toed when they are actually parallel.

When the feet turn out, the knees often follow and splay out; and when this happens, there's external rotation in the legs, which can compromise your lower back. To counteract the tendency to turn your legs out when you backbend, place a block flat on the floor between your feet (in whichever position keeps them hip-distance apart) and keep the inner edges of your feet alongside the block as you come into the pose. Now place a second block between your inner thighs



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(in whatever position keeps your knees hip-distance apart).

Press down with your feet to lift your hips to the ceiling. Extend the flesh of your buttocks toward your knees and gently grip the block between your inner thighs to ensure a neutral leg rotation. These actions will lengthen and broaden your lower back. Externally rotate your arms, palms up, and press down with your outer shoulders and upper arms so that your ribs and middle back come off the floor. Re-create the lift of your shoulder blades into your chest to open your thoracic spine. Move your chest toward your chin, but don't let the back of your neck touch the floor. Instead, keep the natural curve of the neck by lifting the cervical spine into the front body, so someone could slide a finger between your neck and the floor. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths and slowly lower down.

BRIDGING THE GAP

For the full pose, begin in the same position as the last round, but without the blocks. Remember to keep your feet and thighs parallel. Root down evenly through the four corners of each foot and lift your hips. Without the blocks as guides, your knees may start to splay out. You will feel more weight on your outer feet if this happens. Release your inner thighs toward the floor as you did in the first variation and extend your tailbone toward your knees to lengthen the lower back.

Interlace your fingers beneath your hips and externally rotate your upper arms so that your outer shoulders roll under. Make sure when you do this that the movement is purely lateral; don't drag your shoulders away from your ears. Doing so flattens the natural curve of your neck and tightens the trapezius muscles, which should remain relaxed. Imagine that your shoulder blades are a pair of hands lifting into your chest, spreading the front of your body and opening your heart.

When applied to yoga postures, the Sanskrit word *sukha* is often understood as "comfortable," "easy," or "spacious." When your Bridge is aligned so that there is no compression in the lower back and the emphasis is on opening the middle

bridge to your practice

Setu means "bridge," *sarva* means "all," and *anga* means "limb." So in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, all your limbs are working to form a bridge with your body. This pose serves as a bridge in other ways as well, because it connects your practice to other poses—namely Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose) and Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand). Your work in Bridge can inform both those powerful postures, so that when you start to practice them you can truly reap their rewards.

ENERGIZING UPWARD BOW The setup of your legs and feet in Setu Bandha is identical to the lower body in Urdhva Dhanurasana. Sometimes Upward Bow is called Full Wheel, and Setu Bandha is called Half Wheel. Bridge is the ideal pose in which to imprint the correct actions for Upward Bow, because alignment tends to go out the window in the more challenging backbend. Setu Bandha gives the hip flexors a gentle stretch and teaches parallel feet and neutral rotation in the legs, which are essential to protecting your lower back in Upward Bow.

RELAXING SHOULDERSTAND The arms, neck, and upper back in Setu Bandha look similar to how they appear in Shoulderstand. You don't take your entire body weight into those areas in Bridge, however, so it's the ideal place to develop your strength and flexibility before you attempt an inversion like Shoulderstand. Bridge opens the thoracic spine and teaches the actions of lifting the shoulder blades into the chest, externally rotating the arms, and keeping the natural curve in the neck—all crucial to a healthy Shoulderstand.

and upper back, the pose can embody this concept, releasing tight spots in ways that will benefit you in both your practice and your daily life. It will also help you in Shoulderstand and deeper backbends, so that those powerful and transformative poses are equally sweet. Finding *sukha* in Setu Bandha, in other words, can be a veritable bridge to life. ■

Natasha Rizopoulos lives and teaches yoga in Los Angeles and Boston.



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