



Setu

Bandhasana

BY ADAM BORNSTEIN

THE NAME TRANSLATES AS *SETU* = BRIDGE,
BANDHA = A LOCK, OR FORMATION,
ASANA = POSE. HENCE THIS POSE IS
 SOMETIMES REFERRED TO AS THE FORMATION
 OF A BRIDGE POSE.

— — —
Seh-too Bahn-dah-sa-nah

Setu Bandhasana provides a bridge to powerfully unite polarities we hold in our body and mind.

This is a favourite pose for many yoga students. It's easy to understand why, looking at all the benefits it provides ranging from the physical level to its effect on our consciousness.

In our society, many people are cut off from their bodies. With four out of the five senses located in the head we can lose our connection with the rest of our physical form. Our feet being the farthest away from the head are sometimes absent from our field of awareness. Perhaps the first benefit which yoga practice offers us is a reintroduction to our body. Bridge pose, when practised mindfully, can help us re-establish a bond with not only our feet, but with our entire being, inside and out.

Through Bridge pose we learn to connect with both groundedness and expansion. With our feet merging with the earth and our backside strong and supportive, the front of the body is free to expand upward. From this expansion our energy gracefully flows back down through the shoulders, arms, and head to merge once again with the earth. A bridge with a firm foundation rises up from the earth to the sky and back again. This symbolises our spiritual quest of accepting our humanity as represented by the body, and also the aspiration to expand into an experience of the formless reality behind earthly phenomena, and then to embody that reality in the here and now.

Consistent *Setu Bandhasana* practice reveals our inner power. Like other backbends, Bridge pose liberates our energy reserves. It teaches us self-control and how to concentrate and direct our energy. Bridge pose shows us that

we can be powerful beings, giving us the ability to move our body in a precise way, and building endurance and stamina for not only our practice but for our entire life. Bridge pose also imbues a feeling of peace. The mind slows down, the breath stabilises, and we are ushered into a very sattvic (pure, lucid, harmonious) state of being.

For our power to be used wisely it needs to be balanced with the receptive, nourishing quality of peace. With only power at the helm of our life, our vital energies can become misguided and dissipated. The reflective quality of peace gives our energy and power purpose and direction. In the practise of Bridge pose a melding takes place as the power-producing aspects of the pose spills over into the peace-enhancing aspects. This results in a deeply holistic and satisfying experience.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5

MAIN BENEFITS

- Stretches quadricep muscles (front thighs), abdomen, pectorals (chest), and anterior deltoids (front of shoulders).
- Strengthens arches of feet, ankles, quads, hamstrings (back thighs), gluteals (buttocks), erector spinal muscles (muscles along spine), trapezius and rhomboids (muscles between shoulderblades and spine), triceps (back of upper arms), and abdominal muscles.
- Balances endocrine system (glands) especially pituitary in brain, thyroid and parathyroid in throat, thymus in chest, adrenals in lower back, testes (men), and ovaries (women), in the sexual organs.
- Strengthens diaphragm and opens ribcage improving respiration:
- Tones the nervous system by its effects on the spine.
- Increases circulation especially to the brain.
- Influences prana (life force) to be directed to flow upward into Sushumna (energy channel running parallel to spine).
- Awakens our inner sense of strength, and encourages confidence.
- Centres and quiets the mind drawing the energy of the senses within. Teaches us self-control and how to use our energy effectively and economically.

CAUTIONS

- Spinal injuries especially in cervical (neck) area.
- High blood pressure – do not hold for a long duration. (consult your doctor)
- Not advised after first trimester of pregnancy (except when using a bolster and supervised by an experienced teacher).

GUIDELINES

As with all yoga practise, listen to your body. Steadily move towards the finished pose but never strain to reach an external mold. Self-effort is needed to approach the pose but excess force will only detract from the depth of the process.

Gradually allow your awareness to expand to fill-in all the space within your skin. With time you will be able to circulate your awareness throughout your whole body. This will give you the ability to sensitively adjust the pose for maximum benefit and effect.

Maintain smooth steady breathing throughout the duration of the pose. There are exceptions to this: when you become steady and comfortable in holding the pose you may find a natural lessening of the need for breathing. This is subtle and not to be confused with spacing-out. It is an advanced aspect of asana practice where the yogi begins to merge with the inner flow of prana and the stilling of consciousness.

THE FOUNDATION

You cannot build a stable bridge from a weak foundation. The feet and legs are the foundation of the pose. As you are preparing to lift up into the pose take a moment to explore your feet and their relationship to the earth.

Press the centre of the heel downward to merge with the earth, then lift the toes as you press firstly the ball of the big toe, then the ball of all the other toes out to the little toe. As the toes lift and the ball (mound) of each toe presses down, the arches of the feet and the inner ankles will naturally lift upwards. Now stretch the toes apart and slowly lower them back down to the floor. If you have flat feet and want to strengthen the arches you can practise Bridge pose whilst maintaining the lift of the toes (remember the ball of each toe remains pressing down). Your feet will need to be parallel and hip-width apart. Align your knees directly above your ankles. This will provide a solid base of support and allow you to use your legs and pelvis effectively.

If your knees splay open whilst in the pose, it could be an indication that your leg adductor muscles are weak. Bridge pose can be modified to balance your musculature. Before you come up into the pose, place a foam block or cushion between your knees/inner thighs. Place your feet the same distance apart as the knees. As you approach, hold, and come down from the pose maintain a squeezing action of your inner thighs into the block. This variation can also be helpful in stabilising the sacroiliac joint.

Setu Bandhasana is a foundation asana for two important poses: *Sarvangasana* (Shoulderstand pose), and *Chakrasana* (Wheel pose). The opening of the chest and the strengthening of the upper back muscles which enable the shoulderblades to be pulled in towards the spine are both essential for safe Shoulderstand practice. This will be

demonstrated if while holding Bridge you can interlace the fingers (see photo 11), squeeze the shoulderblades in towards the spine and press the backs of your arms into the floor. This coordinated action will transfer the weight of the asana away from the neck and onto the shoulders and arms. For *Chakrasana*, the Bridge pose serves as foundation by teaching the correct movement of the feet, legs, pelvis, and spine in both approaching and descending from the pose.

Practising *Surya Namaskar* (Sun Salutation) with different lunge and backbend variations is an excellent warm-up for *Setu Bandhahsana*. For best results, be mindful of alignment and move in unison with the breath.

PREPARATION SEQUENCES

These three concise sequences are very effective to open the body, breath, and energy flow along the specific pathways of the Bridge pose. They are also very good to do on their own. Practising them consistently will reap great benefits.

CIRCLE OF JOY

This preparatory practice serves to warm and loosen the shoulder girdle. It also effectively opens the breathing muscles maximising oxygen intake and carbon dioxide expulsion. This sequence can be practised in a seated or a standing position.

PHOTO 1: Begin with your hands in *Anjali mudra* (palms together at the heart). Interlace the fingers with the palms facing down. Inhale using the diaphragm from the belly through the ribs to the upper chest; slowly lift the elbows out to the sides. Keep the shoulders down as you do this. Emphasise broadening the collarbones, feeling that the interweaved fingers are attempting to pull apart. This will encourage a deep full inhalation. A good visualisation is to feel as if the rising breath is acting to open the elbows.

PHOTO 2: At the top of the inhalation pause very briefly. As you begin the exhalation slowly start straightening the arms pressing the palms forward. The shoulderblades will move away from the spinal column as you do this. Let the chin release down towards the chest and allow the back to round to deepen the stretch between the shoulderblades.

PHOTO 3: From here begin your inhalation lifting your still interlaced fingers straight

upward alongside the head. Press the arms straight allowing the shoulders to rise upward toward the ears.

PHOTO 4: As you slowly exhale, release the hands apart and lower them down around your sides. Feel the shoulders releasing downward away from the ears. Interlace the hands again, this time behind your lower back. As you slowly inhale, begin straightening the arms towards the floor behind you. Feel the squeezing action of the shoulderblades inward towards the spine. Feel the expansion of the chest.

PHOTO 5: As you exhale, release the hands floating them around and forward at chest level. Join the palms with arms straight.

PHOTO 6: Finish the exhalation drawing the folded palms into the chest. Pause a moment feeling the after-effects. Continue with 3 - 7 cycles.

PELVIC ROCKING

This next sequence is very effective in releasing lumbar spine compression that can lead to backaches. It serves to establish a healthy relationship between the lumbar spine (lower back) and the sacrum (the wedge-shaped fusion of vertebrae at the back of the pelvis). This flow can increase circulation in the lower spine and teach us how to access, balance, and heal this area. Move slowly as you practise this sequence. Do not bounce or jerk in any way. The movement across the spine and sacrum is done by a smooth transference of weight across the five lumbar vertebrae and onto the sacrum and back again. Remember to move in unison with the breath.

PHOTO 7: Lie on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor. Place your knees and feet hip-width apart. Rest your arms comfortably alongside your head. Place a folded blanket under the back of the head if you find your neck tight. Begin observing the breath moving in and out of your lungs. Close your eyes to internalise any sensations arising with the breath-flow. If you can turn all your attention inside you may feel subtle pulsations through your body as you inhale and exhale. On an exhalation slowly begin pressing your lower back into the floor. Observe the lower abdominal muscles contracting and the pubic bone drawing up towards the chest. Keep the upper buttocks in contact with the floor, but allow the tip of the tailbone to rise up.



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13



Photo 14



Photo 15

PHOTO 8: As you inhale slowly feel the breath lifting the lower back slightly away from the floor. As you continue the inhalation begin a steady transference of weight onto the sacrum. Finish the incoming breath by rolling all the way towards the lower sacrum. The lower back will arch gently away from the floor and you will feel the pubic bone being drawn towards the floor between the legs (away from the chest). There should be no pain in this position. If you do experience an excess of lumbar compression, then do not come up so high. Continue with the next exhalation to slowly transfer the lower back to the floor as in photo 7. Remember to traverse across the entire terrain from low back to sacrum and back again. Enjoy the fusion of breath and movement. Continue for 7 - 20 cycles.

ROLLING BRIDGE

After pelvic rocking the rolling bridge will assist us in our preparation for *Setu Bandhasana* by teaching how to most effectively lift up into the pose and how to lower down back to the floor. In addition, this sequence warms and tones the essential body parts for safe practice: abdominal muscles, legs, pelvis, hips, and spine. This flow can provide a deeply integrated experience; a meditation in motion, where we are brought into the present moment.

PHOTO 9: After practising a few repetitions of pelvic rocking, bring your arms to the floor alongside your pelvis. On an exhalation press the lower back to the floor.

PHOTO 10: Maintaining the scooping-under action of the pelvis, as you inhale begin peeling the spine away from the floor. The tailbone lifts up first, followed by each of the five lumbar vertebrae. Accompany the spine lifting by slowly raising your arms to vertical. Pause here as you exhale feeling your feet merge into the floor.

PHOTO 11: As you begin your next inhalation continue the progressive lifting of the spine away from the floor. The centre of the heel and the ball of the feet all move downward as the spine lifts up. Keep the knees and feet hip-width apart, and observe how the back of the thighs, buttocks, and spinal muscles are contracting, causing the top of your body to expand from thighs to pelvis to belly to chest. Feel the weight transferring to the back of the shoulders as you bring the arms all the way to the floor alongside the head.

The pelvis lifts up to be in line with the knees

and chest in the full lifted position. Rise up in one long inhalation or divide the lift into two or three breaths.

As you begin your exhalation slowly release the spine back down to the floor in reverse order, upper back to pelvis. Maintain the scooping-under action of the pelvis all the way down. You can do this in one long exhalation, or take two or three breaths to come all the way back down. The arms will also follow the descent, lifting up then lowering them and the pelvis to the floor. Practise the rolling Bridge 3 - 10 cycles. Now you are ready for the next stage:

SETU BANDHASANA

Key Practice Tips:

- Press the feet down evenly to lift up into the pose.
- Keep the knees the same distance apart as the feet.
- Actively lift the pelvis to be in line between the knees and chest.
- The pubic bone will be higher than the navel to assure lumbar spine support.
- Lengthen the tailbone towards the back of knees.
- Press the back of shoulders and arms down into the floor.
- Maintain a smooth consistent breath throughout the duration of the pose.

The variations explained below are listed progressively from easiest to most challenging. There are many other versions and ways to adapt the pose to different body types and conditions. Remember to listen to the feedback from your own body and mind. Don't forget to breathe. If you find that too much pressure is placed on the cervical spine whilst holding the pose, then fold a blanket in half, then in half again and place it under the shoulders about 5cms higher than shoulder level. The blanket should be slightly wider than your shoulders and as long as your arms. Consult an experienced teacher if you need further assistance.

PHOTO 12: In this variation, once you are up into the pose, you walk one shoulder at a time underneath you. Interlace the fingers with the palms facing each other. Squeeze the shoulderblades in towards the spine and evenly press the back of the shoulders, arms,

and wrists into the floor. This will go a long way in taking pressure off the neck and distributing the weight from shoulders to hands into the floor. If your chest is tight and/or your upper back muscles are weak it may be difficult to join the hands. Instead press the palms down into the floor on either side of the pelvis to stabilise the asana. Remember the instructions for the feet and legs from the Rolling Bridge.

As you hold the asana with the pubic bone lifting higher than the navel you will notice the thighs and buttocks working to support the pelvic lift. Feel that every exhalation is sending a current of energy through the feet, into the earth. As you inhale feel a current rise up through the soles of the feet. Feel the lifeforce lift up the legs, spine, and heart, and into the throat. Observe the parts of you that are in contact with the supporting earth, which parts are contracting, and which parts are expanding. Maintain the pose for a few smooth cycles of breath. Then on an exhalation slowly lower the spine back down. On the way down to the floor an option is to lift the heels up and strongly tuck the tailbone under to relieve any lumbar compression. Pause and feel the after-effects before counterposing.

PHOTO 13: This variation will be for more experienced practitioners. The hands will be clasping the ankles. For this to happen the feet will need to start closer in towards the hips. The spine will need to be more flexible (the arc in the spine will be more acute with feet closer in and less acute with feet further away). Taking hold of the ankles, exhale pressing the feet downward. As you inhale begin lifting the pelvis off the floor, maintaining good alignment through the feet, legs, and pelvis. Remember that through the lifting action of the sacrum the pubic bone lifts upward higher than the navel. Feel the tailbone lengthening towards the back of the knees to maintain lumbar spine decompression. The breastbone will dynamically lift and the chest will broaden from armpit to armpit. Breathe and focus your attention within your body. Lower down slowly on an exhalation, lifting heels up as an option. Release the palms up by your sides and feel the surge of purifying lifeforce flooding through you.

PHOTO 14: This variation is more challenging. I love it because of the inner power and groundedness it brings to life plus the feelings of expansion and upward aspiration. Please

don't attempt this or the next version until you have been practising the preparation sequence for at least a few months and you feel very solid with the previous two variations. Remember that with the first variation of Bridge pose you will be receiving great benefit. Be happy where you are and only move on when it feels right.

Place the palms by your sides and ascend into the pose following the previous instructions. Once you are up walk the elbows underneath the back. Place the hands at the rear pelvic crest and drawing the tailbone towards the back of knees, lifting sacrum high. Now, pressing the right foot downward into the floor, lift the left foot off the floor and draw the knee up towards the chest. Breathe in now. As you exhale press the left foot upward straighten the leg. Point the toes to encourage the lifting action. Then pull the toes back, pressing up through the ball of the foot. You will need to press downward strongly through the foot on the floor as well as lift powerfully through the top leg. For this to be an asana and not simply gymnastics, it's important to maintain a smooth steady breath and spread your awareness throughout the body. This is the first phase of the variation called *Ekapada Setu Bandhasana* (One-leg Bridge pose).

PHOTO 15: The next phase is even more challenging. You clasp both hands around the ankle of the foot that remains on the floor. Do your best to press down through the centre of the heel as well as the entire ball of the lower foot from inner to outer foot. This will serve to keep the leg and knee in good alignment. Press down through the back of the shoulders and arms all the way to the wrists. Inhale drawing the free leg upward towards the chest. Exhale and extend the leg straight, pressing up through the ball of the foot. Breathe here; exhaling connecting with the earth and inhaling extend and expand upward. Maintain the stability of the lifting pelvis. Lower the leg in reverse steps and repeat with the other leg. When you are ready to come down release the hands to the floor. Pause with the entire spine and pelvis on the floor. Open the feet wider than the pelvis and bring the knees towards each other. Relax and feel. (Straighten the legs to relieve the knee flexion if need be.)

COUNTERPOSES

Sometimes the best counterpose is to be still and deeply internalise the after-effects of the asana (or sequence of asanas). Following Setu Bandhasana with a few moments of stillness will enable the asana to reveal its hidden treasures. Observe the energy contained within you.

In general for counterposing backbends we can use twists (such as Jathara Parvritti-Supine Twist), forward bends (such as Apanasana - Knees to chest), and abdominal strengtheners (variations of Navasana-Boat pose). Consult your teacher or a good yoga book for details on these poses.

DISCIPLINE LEADS TO FREEDOM

Bridge pose has the power to cut through any veils separating you from your essential nature. The social mask, the ego personality, the habitual reactions all disappear (at least for a few moments) as if they had never existed. The great yogis teach us that the only way out of the 'anguishing monotony' (as ParamahansaYogananda called it) of continually slipping into negative habitual patterns, is to reconnect to our oneness with Spirit through faith, continuous practise, and non-attachment. Without non-attachment our practise can build the ego instead of dissolving it. Without continuous practise we can lose our way in the myriad of worldly pulls and distractions. Without faith and trust in the process and the teachings, we will feel like a leaf in the waves, forever being tossed up and down.

Discipline and freedom are two seemingly contradictory polarities. Yoga shows us that for true freedom to be experienced we need to harness and guide our energy on a positive and balanced path. Yogic discipline helps us to transfer our choice-making power from the ego and its endless desires to the always-centred calm presence of the Self. The disciplined practise of yoga progressively assists us in slowly training the body and mind to carve new pathways towards true freedom. Freedom in its highest manifestation supports the liberation of our natural state of bliss. Visualise your yoga as a rainbow bridge, focussing light and infinite peace within yourself. With faith and trust, dive deep into your practice remembering the aim of yoga: the end of all suffering and the reconnection with your eternal Self.

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