

## Setu Bandhasana Series

### Bridge Variation: Alternate Sides

This can be practiced by itself as a back bending warm-up. Alternating arms brings awareness of the stretch to the sides of the torso, as well as to differences between the two sides of the body in any given practice session.



Begin as you would for Bridge (Setu Bandhasana)

Lift right arm and hips together on an inhalation.



Lower the spine, vertebra by vertebra, stretching the right side of torso as you exhale.



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Raise hips, inhaling.



Exhale, lower both arm and hips.



Relax buttocks and take a normalizing breath; then repeat to the left side.



Relax and breath again.

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Repeat with both arms. Lifting both hips and arms. Lowering just the spine. Lifting the spine again. Finally lowering both arms and hips together. Coordinate the movement with your breath, relaxing at the end.



**Snow Angels:** In an earlier post I demonstrated this in the snow. This is an imaginative variation of the bridge often used as a warm-up as well. If you are not used to back bending, moving with the breath without holding is the safest way to begin to build strength and flexibility in the back body.

So imagine you are lying in the snow and want to carve the imprint of wings with your arms.

Lift both arms and hips as in the previous variation. (last photo above) When your arms reach overhead and your hips are high, exhale and carve your arms through the snow by your side as you lower your hips.



Then reverse, carving your arms through the snow overhead as you lift your hips. Lower your arms overhead as you stretch each vertebra down

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onto the ground. Repeat the arm circles and lifts as many times as you like. Then rest, breathe, and relax.



**Setu Bandhasana** – The traditional bridge pose.

Lying on your back with your knees bent, rotate your arms from the shoulders until your palms roll up and your thumbs point away from your body. Notice the sensation of “open” shoulders, with your shoulder blades flattening against the ground.



Turn your palms downwards from the elbows, so that your shoulders stay open.

Press into your feet, arms, and shoulders to lift your hips.

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Hold for a few breaths as you scan your body for sensation. Notice if you are rolling inwards or outwards on your feet. Make little movements outwards and inwards with your knees to notice how the pressure changes on your feet. If your feet feel even, your knees are probably in proper alignment over your heels. If your knees fall apart there will be unnecessary constriction in your lower back. Notice the arch in your spine. How does it shift when you press more or less firmly into your shoulders, your feet, or your arms? Aim for a comfortable, even curve. Let your head rest heavily on the floor. Your chest rises to your chin, not your chin to your chest. Gazing up at the ceiling can help you keep your head back. Are you breathing fully into the front of your body? If your breath is shallow, relax a bit more. Injuries occur when we force our bodies into unaccustomed positions. You may find that your spine naturally rises and falls a bit with your breath.

If you want more challenge, interlace your fingers below your spine to open the shoulders still more and lift even higher.



**The Wheel** - This is a more advanced back bend, but if you can come into the posture comfortably you will experience a wonderful release in the cervical spine and allow even more circulation through the thyroid area in your throat.



In either the Bridge or the Wheel you can experiment with rising up on your toes for a higher arch or lifting one leg at a time for a more extreme inversion. Straightening the legs while the feet are on the floor creates more arch in the upper spine.

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Release from the Bridge or Wheel gradually.



**The Hammock** - Spines love to swing, twisting gently, after back bending. Lift just a bit off the floor and let your hips sway right and left.



**The Fish** - The Fish is another inverted, back bending posture that benefits the thyroid gland. All the same contraindications apply: unmedicated high blood pressure, eye and neck issues. If the posture is new to you, only hold for a short while. Add variations gradually.

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Fish - From any of the bridge variations, drop your hips down onto your hands or wrists and then extend your legs.



Press down on your hips and allow your chest to rise until your head comes off the floor.



Then lay the back or crown of your head down on the floor for balance. Support the weight of your body by continuing to press down on your hips and legs. For a more relaxing version of the posture, you can fold a blanket under your upper back. For more challenge, lift your legs.



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**Cool Down** - Listen to your body and see if there are nurturing stretches that your body is calling for.

### Hip Opening Stretch -

You may want to pull your right knee towards your chest and circle it in both directions. Then cross the ankle over the opposite knee which you will gently pull towards your chest. Feel the stretch in your right hip. Reverse sides.

### Twist -

Simply rock your knees side to side, perhaps gazing in the opposite direction. You can keep your knees close together or spread them apart.

### Pranayama: Belly Breathing -



Relax with your knees bent, feet on the floor, and hands resting on your belly. Take several deep, smooth breaths, feeling your belly rise and fall. Then breath into the back of your body, allowing your back and sides to balloon, but not allowing your belly to rise. The tension in your belly signals that your transverse abdominal muscles are activated. Try not to change the shape of your spine by scooping your belly as this would activate different muscles. Back bends encourage lots of expansion in the front of your lungs, so here's a chance to breath into the back of them. After holding your belly in for several breaths, return to relaxed bely breathing.

**Sivasana** - Don't forget to allow your nervous system to integrate all the benefits of your practice! Relax and Breathe!