

Bridge Pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana)

The bridge pose is wonderful in many ways, and the main benefit is that it helps to keep the spine flexible and healthy.

Bridge Pose can be practised in a gentle way, where it becomes a restorative pose to counter a more demanding practice. It can also be practised energetically, building strength in the back, neck and wrists, and opening up the thoracic area of the spine as well as the front of the chest. This latter practice is the one that gives us that wonderful energising feeling that we associate with backbends in Yoga.

Another, less well documented benefit of Bridge Pose is that it helps with the general alignment of the body, in particular the pelvis.

When the pelvis is misaligned, there is likely to be curvature of the spine in the direction of the tilt. Less obvious is the potential damage to several other parts of the body. Younger people can often live quite comfortably with misalignments in the body such as these, as their natural flexibility may compensate for the asymmetry. But we will pay the price after years of a tilted pelvis, with possible pain in our necks, backs (upper and lower), pelvis, legs, knees, and hips.

Bridge Pose is excellent at helping to correct or even prevent some of these issues – but only if you practise carefully, and are not out of alignment in your posture. So BEWARE! If your Bridge Pose is not in alignment you may either exacerbate an existing problem, or introduce a completely new one.

To begin:

Lie on your back on the floor on a non-slip surface in bare feet: it is essential that your feet won't slip.

To ensure that you have the best chance of correct alignment of your pelvis, your feet need to be in line. One easy way of ensuring this is to practise with your toes touching a wall.

To help with alignment, ensure that the feet are hip width apart – i.e. the outer edge of the heel needs to be in line with the outer edge of the hip socket (not the flesh of the hip).

Down on the floor it can be hard to judge this, so a good ploy is to practise with a block or book (the same width as your hips) between your feet.

The outer edges of your feet need to be parallel to each other. If you feel a twinge in your lumbar back, have your heels wider apart than your toes. If the twinge is more like pain, please proceed very cautiously, and do not go into the full pose until your strength in these areas has increased.

At all times keep the lower back long. The curvature in the back is aimed at the upper thoracic area, behind the breastbone.

Very important: When practising the Bridge Pose, do not move your head. This pose transfers weight to your neck and shoulders - please protect this vulnerable part of the body.

With feet firmly planted on the ground, tuck under the tailbone, making your spine as long as it can be throughout its length. Lay your arms, palms up, on the ground beside you. Do not be tempted to press into the ground with your arms or hands for this part of the posture.

Keep that length in the back as you begin to push your knees away from your head (towards the wall if your toes are against it), allowing your back to rise off the ground – tailbone first, followed by lumbar back, and moving upwards towards the neck. Most of the work here is done by your quadriceps.

Look along your body to check that your hips are level – don't have one higher than the other.

Then with care, lower your back to the ground, with the buttocks the last to touch the mat. Imagine lowering a necklace of pearls – each pearl is one vertebra, and you come down vertebra by vertebra.

You may find that you would prefer your feet to be closer to your buttocks. In this case, move your whole body closer to the wall, to maintain the alignment of the pelvis.

For maximum strength and stability the lower legs (from knee to ankle) need to be completely vertical. You will be safest, and gain most benefit, with the feet firmly planted on the ground – the weight even on the big toe joints, little toe joints and inner and outer edges of the heels. The distance between the feet and the buttocks will gradually increase as your back becomes more flexible.

After some practice, when you know how it feels to have a properly aligned pelvis in this position, you won't need to be near the wall. But please pay attention to this all the time, as it's so easy to get used to a 'normal' feeling of misalignment. And when you're used to the pose, periodically try it against the wall again – just to check.

Working with the breath

It's good to synchronise the movement with your breath. Try coming up on an in-breath, then down on an out-breath for a few breaths. Then reverse it and see how it's different. You may wish to practise differently on different days. As always in Yoga, listen to your body.

After you've done a few you might find it helpful to hug your knees into your chest, and maybe roll from side-to-side a few times.

Practise in this way for some time, until your body feels it would like to go further. Don't listen to what your mind is saying – it is likely that it will either want to spur you on to a

more 'advanced' pose, or protect you from possible discomfort and be extra cautious. Your body will know what's best for you – every time you practise. Some days your body may want to go further; some days it will not. Please respect that.

The full Bridge Pose

Start as before, and with your arms by your sides and palms **down**, push your knees away and as before, allow your back to rise. This time keep your back in the air as you continue to breathe evenly.

One at a time roll your shoulders right under your body. You'll find that your arms follow and move more under your body.

If it's comfortable to do so, interlock your fingers and press down into the ground through the length of your arms. If your interlocked hands do not stay firmly on the ground, please release the interlock and place your hands, palms down underneath you – your body isn't quite ready for this stage yet.

When in the pose you are aiming for the highest part of your body to be the pubic bone, and the arch to be in the upper (thoracic) spine.

For those of you who find it comfortable to have interlocked hands on the ground, and your back is not strained, you may wish to consider the next stage of Bridge Pose, where your back is supported by your hands. This is an advanced posture, and I recommend that you don't try it without the guidance of a qualified teacher. If you have already had this guidance, then the points to remember are:

- With your hands supporting your lumbar back, your feet must be firmly planted on the ground. If not, it is best to keep practising the earlier versions for now.
- Try to be light on your hands – don't lean too heavily on them.
- Press the shoulders and forearms into the ground.
- Try to keep the elbows in line with the shoulders – not splayed out.
- The upper chest moves towards the chin as the chin moves very slightly away from the upper chest.
- Another version is to clasp the ankles with the hands.
- Come down very slowly and carefully – before your body is tired.
- Allow time to rest from Bridge Pose – it is a demanding posture.

Namaste

(This description of Bridge Pose would be much enhanced with illustrations. If anyone can draw the stages, please let me know as I would very much like to include them.)