

Setu Bandhasana: Bridge Pose

Pronounced sey-too-buhn-dhaah-suh-nuh the word setu means bridge or dam in Sanskrit.

This pose is named the bridge pose because its shape resembles a bridge. Also like a dam energy is locked into the body due to the placement of the chin down against the neck; this placement is a soft form of jalandhara bandha the neck lock, which we shall study in more depth later on.



This pose is both a backbend and a very mild inversion, there are many different variations of bridge pose but we shall take the one illustrated above as the standard.

Teaching Points:

Stage 1

- Good to work dynamically first, lifting and lowering in Dwi Pada Pitham
- Could stay working dynamically, resting as needed

Stage 2

- Lie in a semi-supine position, feet placed hip width apart, feet facing forwards, arms down by sides
- Check the neck is long with no padding behind the neck, nestling the tailbone to the wall in front and the crown of the head to the wall behind, lengthening the spine along the floor.
- Inhaling press down into both feet and arms, peeling the back off the floor as the hips raise upwards
- Could stay here, and lower as needed

Stage 3

- If possible begin to externally rotate both shoulders, lifting and opening the chest as the hips lift into a deeper hyperextension
- Interlink fingers pressing down into the ground, with both arms being drawn together and down towards the floor
- Each time you inhale lift and open the chest and ribcage and exhaling press down into the floor with the feet.
- When ready to exit, unclasp the fingers, broadening shoulders and lower the spine down to the floor, one vertebrae at a time.

Benefits:

Alleviates mild depression
Stretches lower back & hip flexors
Opens and expands chest & shoulders
Strengthens hamstrings

Promotes good hip extension
Promotes good breathing
Mildly stimulates thyroid gland
Alleviates menstrual pain

Good preparation

Shoulder mobilizers, chest openers, back mobilizers, simple twists, hip flexor stretches/hip extensor strengtheners

Cautions & possible modifications

- Pregnancy: caution lying supine due to pregnancy hypotension, can practice gently & dynamically without strong backbend if symptom free or take an alternative

- Hiatus hernia: take gentler alternative such as dwi pada pitham so abdominals are not placed under excessive pressure
- Hypertension, acid reflux, heart condition: practice with caution as mild inversion with head lower than heart, dynamically is often preferable or can choose an upright alternative
- Low back conditions: if compression in lower back use gentler dynamic dwi pada pitham or could try coming on to tip-toes in full pose

Exploration

Alignment of feet & knees

Generally keep knees and feet aligned, knees stacked over ankles, without letting knees fall inwards or outwards, with feet pointing directly forwards, however if this foot placement causes pain or discomfort in the knees then we can adjust the direction of the feet checking that the knees are still aligned over the ankles.

Subtle co-ordination of muscles

Note that if the gluteus maximus has to be excessively engaged, usually when hamstrings and adductors are not strong enough to move the hips into hyperextension, then this can pull the legs into external rotation at the hips so it can be worth spending time practicing with a block or two between thighs to help engage the adductors. Also take care that the lower back extensor muscles are not being overly activated as this limits hyperextension of the legs at the hips. As such it can be helpful to explore which muscles are being activated within the static pose and see what effect it has to reduce the work of the buttocks & lower back whilst more fully engaging the adductors & hamstrings, and pressing down into feet & arms etc. There is a great deal of subtle co-ordination of muscle groups here to explore!

Breathing

The static bridge is also a good place to explore the breath as the diaphragm will have to work harder against gravity to inhale and if we take our attention inwardly deeper than the muscles then this can greatly help to activate the PNS and bring more ease and openness to the body.

Simpler versions



Dwi pada pitham (two foot support)

Here we work dynamically lifting and lowering arms as we inhale up and exhale down, trying to work with the breath and with symmetry.

Dwi pada pitham (two foot support) variation

Here we lift into two foot support then exhaling, keeping arms along the ground behind, slowly curl the spine to the floor, vertebrae by vertebrae. Inhaling again lift the hips, realigning the arms and exhaling lower the back to the floor. We can work in this way several times until we want to finish when we lower the arms down as well as the spine. This version is very good at mobilizing the muscles of the shoulders as well as the back and spine.





Hip Opening Bridge

Here we place the outside of the right ankle against the left thigh ensuring the right ankle is not twisting by keeping the foot square and rotating the leg from the hip. Inhaling we peel the back from the floor allowing the right knee to fall to sides and exhaling lower with care. We must try to work the spine symmetrically.

Developments



Salamba Setu Bandhasana (supported bridge)

We can move into supported bridge by placing hands to either side of the lower back but must be able to align the elbows with the shoulders meaning this version requires good external shoulder rotation and hip extension.



Eka pada salamba setu bandha (one foot supported bridge)

From supported bridge keep hips high as you raise one leg vertically. Then transfer to the other side. The foundation needs to be very firm for this version.



Bound Bridge

If there is enough hip extension and the knees are comfortable we can hold the heels

Adjustments

We can lightly touch feet if toes have lifted or to indicate if ankles are not aligned with knees, although we should ensure that students will still have comfort within the knees if feet are moved.

We can place a hand beneath the thoracic region and invite students to lift away from the hand.

Some teachers will place a strap under hips or the thoracic region and lift the body away from the ground, but this can be problematic if we are not careful as we may attempt to lift the student with too much force or too high and it is often better and safer to ask the students to lift up and away from our hand using their own effort.

