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## **Setu Bandhasana**

**~ Bridge Pose**

"Begin by lying on your back with your knees bent, and the soles of your feet pressing into the ground. Slowly peel your spine from the floor, beginning with your tailbone, moving vertebra by vertebra, till your weight is resting on your shoulders. Engage the thighs here. You may also like to roll your shoulders under you, interlock your fingers and press your arms firmly into the floor. This helps to open and lift the chest. Once you've settled here, bring your awareness to your breath, deepening and lengthening it so that you fill the three parts of your lungs."

Setu Bandhasana affects the physical body in so many different ways. Let's take a moment to explore some of these in detail:

### *Postural alignment, strengthening and support*

Setu Bandhasana is an exceptional asana for strengthening different muscle groups. If we look from the floor up, we notice the power and

strength of this asana begins with the feet and travels up through the quadriceps/thighs, into the abdominal cavity, through the back and into the neck. Each of these muscle groups are strengthened by the isometric contractions (The muscle does not overcome the resistance of the weight and so it does not change length) (Martini, 1998). The benefit of this, aside from feeling really strong, is that it creates greater muscle tone. It is this tone that both stabilises and supports the position of bones and joints (Martini, 1998).

Of particular interest, is the way setu bandhasana strengthens the muscles through the back, and opens and releases the thoracic cavity (including the heart and lungs). (Farhi, 2000). In our day to day lives, we don't often extend the spine in this way. Much of what we do bends and rounds the spine forwards. Over time, this may lead to rounded shoulders, a collapsing through the chest, and a shortening and tightening of the back muscles as they attempt to support the upright body. Setu bandhasana elongates the spinal column, creates space between the vertebrae, broadens through the shoulders, and lengthens and releases those back muscles that have been working so hard. Backbends also engage the hyoid muscle, which lifts the hyoid bone and simultaneously lifts and opens the sternum, chest and engages the abdominal muscles and organs. Whilst these muscles support the neck and lower back during the asana, their position increases the volume of the thoracic cavity and tones and massages the digestive organs.

#### *Increased volume through the thoracic cavity*

The increased volume through the thoracic cavity, first and foremost improves respiratory functioning, as it allows the lungs to expand more

fully. This expansion means there is a greater surface area available for nutrient/gas exchange (Martini, 1998). This has benefits throughout the body as it increases the available oxygen (for aerobic energy production - ATP; essential for all smooth and skeletal muscle, and brain activity), and clears the system of waste products/gases (ie. Carbon dioxide) (Martini, 1998).

Additional benefits in this area are as follows:

- Increased blood flow to the area, which combined with the opening created through the hips/groin and shoulder/armpit area will stimulate lymphatic drainage (The lymphatic system produces and maintains lymphocytes, returns fluid and solutes from peripheral tissue to the blood, and distributes hormones, nutrients and wastes from their tissues of origin) (Martini, 1998).
- The subtle inversion reduces gravitational pressure on the heart and so eases the pressure in the cardiovascular system (essential nutrients, and oxygen are transported to cells in blood, via arteries and arterioles (the actual exchange happens in capillaries). These vessels alter their diameter, and subsequently the pressure, depending upon what the body needs. De-oxygenated blood, waste products and carbon dioxide are returned, via the heart to the lungs, these vessels rely on gravity to achieve this. Thus inversions reduce the pressure on the venous system) (Martini, 1998).
- The expansion of the lungs during inhalation may also place gentle pressure on the thymus (a gland in the endocrine system, which

plays a pivotal role in maintaining our immune system) (Martini, 1998).

### *Toning the abdominal organs*

As was mentioned earlier, setu bandhasana also provides a toning massage for the abdominal organs (Khalsa, 2002). The backward stretch directs more blood flow, and creates more space through the abdominal cavity. This is beneficial for the organs (pancreas, gall bladder, liver and kidneys, even the adrenal glands), but also for the gastrointestinal tract. Ie. it aids and supports better peristaltic movement of the bolus, through the stomach and small intestine, more efficient absorption of nutrients from and secretion of waste into the large intestine, and finally waste excretion from the rectum (Martini, 1998). Optimal functioning in the digestive system is essential for maintaining a healthy, toxin free body.

### *But wait there's more...*

It is believed that back bending postures are great for lifting mental fatigue, lethargy and depression, as they are stimulating asanas (Fenton, 2004). These asanas open the chest and heart, increase oxygen intake, increase the flow of blood to the head (that subtle inversion that places the head below the heart), and in the case of setu bandhasana also stimulate the thyroid gland (Class notes, 2004). It is the thyroid gland that secretes the hormones that are responsible for increasing cellular metabolic rates, and also the rate of ATP production (energy for cells) (Martini, 1998).

I remember I hated this asana when I first began yoga (I didn't have the strength...), but I have grown to really love practising it. Partly because it seemed to always be practised in classes, but also because it's many benefits can be felt on and off the mat.

References:

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