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Backbends: Root to Rise
by **Debbi Murphy**



Though the concept of balance permeates all yoga philosophy, it is specifically addressed as it relates to asana in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra 2.46. "posture (asana) [should be] stable (sthira) and comfortable (sukha)," says yoga we are constantly finding a balance between stability (sthira) and openness (sukha) is all that the sutras say about asana.

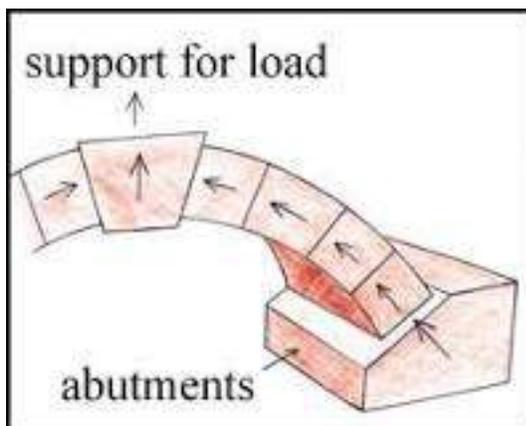
The rhythm or modulation between these two seemingly opposing forces is especially important in Spinal Extensions (or Backbends as they are commonly labeled). Although backbends appear to be the epitome of openness, it is essential that they are grounded in stability ... both physically and energetically. With the full front body spread wide open, they can leave us being and feeling freedom not found in other poses, but at the same time elicit a sense of vulnerability. To bring about the best these poses have to offer

without falling victim to the worst they can elicit, it's especially important to build sthira, stability at the onset and keep it with us as we extend and open more. You can think of this emotionally. We want to be open to others, but we need a foundation of boundaries to keep from getting hurt. So the question we ask ourselves with backbends is, "How do we maintain a sense of being rooted while at the same time extend our boundaries?"



How to Build Sthira

Arches as a Fundamental Source of Stability



Those who work in the building industry know that arches are key to the stability of structures. From the Great Roman Arches of early civilization to modern civil engineers, builders have used the concept of dispersing weight more evenly by building in arches. Why is an arch strong?

Instead of pushing straight down, the load of an **arch** is carried outward along the curve of the **arch** to the supports at each end. The weight is transferred to the supports at either end. These supports, called the abutments, carry the load and keep the ends of the bridge from spreading out. A natural arch, natural bridge, or (less commonly) rock arch is a natural rock formation where an arch has formed with an opening underneath. Natural arches commonly form

where inland cliffs, coastal cliffs, fins or stacks are subject to erosion from the sea, rivers or weathering (subaerial processes). In our own anatomy, our feet are arched while other bipedal species are not. This is one of our evolutionary advantages. It is why we can stand up longer and

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run farther. There are many examples of arches in the body, but here we'll focus on the arches that are supporting the load above. your feet when you're standing, your hands when they're your support and your spine.

Your spine is actually made up of two undulating and balancing arches (as are many structures). We have two curves inward balancing two curves outward. These curves are called the primary and secondary because one developed before the other. Our primary curves are kyphotic (sacrum and thoracic...and some would say the back of the skull) and our secondary curves are lordotic (lumbar and cervical). As in engineering, we are most stable when these curves are balanced.

Arches also have what's called a keystone. A center piece that provides for more width at the top (see drawing) but still has stability at the bottom.

Bandhas

Centering

Root to Rise: Pelvic/Sacral Rhythm (hara)

Think of the pelvis as that keystone of your body. The tilt of the pelvis is like the cornerstone of all extending action. Because of the increased mobility of the lumbar spine just above the sacrum, we need to initiate all backbending action from the pelvis and continue to use the modulating ability of the muscles that control the pelvic tilt throughout the extension to ensure that the arch is even and properly dispersing the weight. If you think of the bridge we discussed, imagine if the keystone became damaged and lost its shape. Of course, the bridge would fall.

In yoga we often call this area of the body the hara, which means home. Think of always establishing a firm foundation of your home, your roots, before you attempt to extend. Of course, this has all kinds of implications emotionally and psychologically, too. Hence, this is why the first root chakra (muladhara) is associated with stability...and it comes first! In fact, the more we extend...physically, emotionally, mentally.....the more we can be pushed to uproot but the more important it is to use care not to do so.

Pelvic Tilts Defined & Practice

Think of your pelvis as a bowl. If you were standing in mountain and you spilled your bowl forward, you are in a forward pelvic tilt (anteversion). If you tipped it backwards, you'd be in a backward pelvic tilt (retroversion). Your pelvic girdle can also tip sideways a bit but we'll leave it to this forward and backward plane of movement (sagittal plane). In ALL asanas, we are always calibrating this movement forward and backward by muscles in the front, side and back of the body. I like to think of these "core" muscles as our roots along with the pelvis. (and again, you can always make that analogy of our core values, we're safer when we move or make decisions from there).

If you look at someone in a "backbend", you would probably guess they were in a forward pelvic tilt, right? This is because of the natural lordotic curve of the lumbar region. Tipping the pelvic

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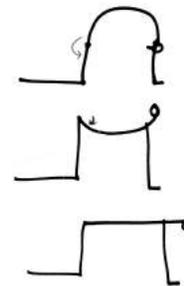
girdle forward would make our backbend **look** more bendy, right? But, remember the important concept of Root to Rise. If we were to let our pelvic girdle tip forward, we would feel a pinch in the back of our lumbar region.....because that's literally what we're doing. We're exploiting the bendiness without providing support or calibration. Think again of that keystone. The stability has been lost. Jason Crandell reminds us that, "Backbends—like all poses—should be practiced with an emphasis on distributing sensations and effort rather than concentrating them. We should work towards creating an even arc in the spine, rather than muscling through and focusing on the size of the pose." Another great teacher, Gary Kraftsow, explains how this then affects the upper part of the back spine, the thoracic "kyphotic" curve. "The key to the thoraco-lumbar rhythm, and therefore all backward bends, is the technique of expanding the chest on the inhale while maintaining abdominal contraction initiated on the exhale. At the initiation of the inhale expand the chest and lift the ribs, thereby lengthening the thoracic spine and stretching the front of the torso, and, as the chest expands, open the shoulders and pull them down and back. As the volume of air is reduced in the lungs on exhale, if you have a normal to excessive thoracic curve, in order to flatten it, contract the muscles of the upper back, pull the shoulders back, and push the mid-thoracic forward; or, if your thoracic curve is already flattened, focus on the vertebra extension of the spine and avoid pushing the mid-thoracic forward. Then, on all successive inhales, maintain a slight abdominal contraction, in order to prevent excessive forward rotation of the pelvis and posterior lumbar intervertebral compression." In other words, the key is to expand the chest on the inhale while maintaining abdominal stability initiated on the exhale. I'd add to the stability by activating the adductors. All of this rooting sets said to rising.

Before beginning with the practice, think of the places in your own body that you feel restrict the opening of backbends. We're all different, but most likely these will be areas that are tight on the front body (front hips, shoulders) or weak on the back body (back muscles, gluteals, hamstrings). Any backbend sequence should involve preliminary opening of these muscle groups as well as core integration work with pelvic tilts. In the practice below, consider ways you could make these different positions more "juicy" by adding dynamic work with your arms, longer holds on a block or with straps, etc.

Pelvic Tilts and Back Body Strengthening

Supine Pelvic Tilts

Pelvic Tilts from Cat Pose



Flow from Extended Child to Cobra - closed or open chain

Locust (Salabhasana) - open chain

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Cobra (Bhujangasana) - closed chain

Front Hip Opening Focus

Pigeon (Eka Pada Rajakapotasana) - closed or open chain

Camel with one knee forward (Ekapada Ustrasana)

Warrior I, II and III (Virabhadrasana I, II and III)

Dancing Warrior Natarajasana

Add add any of these shoulder variations to the above work:

Cow face (Gomukhasana) arms

Peacock (Pincha Mayurasana) prep

Holding a block between hands with back to the wall, knees bent and bringing the block overhead to the wall.

Clasp hands behind the back or behind the head.

Also remember, ALL “PURE” BACKBENDS ARE CLOSED HIP. Therefore, work with a block between the upper legs to encourage inward rotation is helpful warm-up.