

## The Compassionate Backbend

In backbends, we come face-to-face with the boundaries of our flexibility, patience, and equanimity. But learning to practice with our limitations—instead of struggling against them—can make backbending an exercise in self-acceptance.

By Kate Tremblay

Most of us come to yoga seeking sanctuary. We realize how important it is to briefly step away from the demands of life and relax into a spacious quality of mind that allows us to be with ourselves as we are, without judgment. Insulated from the racket of demands and from the need to rush, we become quiet enough to hear the stirrings of our hearts. And in the act of accepting whatever we find there, we replenish our energy and inspiration. Accepting the truth of our selves, our hearts, our muscles, our level of energy in any given moment is the height of compassion, and practiced this way, yoga becomes an exercise in equanimity.

How is it, then, that so many of us quickly abandon these ideals when we practice backbends? If we're not paying close attention, the acceptance and lovingkindness we were working with in other poses suddenly dissipates. Any practice of the [yamas](#) and *niyamas*, those attitudes and behaviors that epitomize the spirit of yoga, falls away. We grasp for a deeper opening, greedy for the glory of a perfect pose. We refuse to surrender to our own body's wisdom. If we're not paying close attention, we can become shockingly forceful and disrespectful of ourselves.

With few exceptions, backbends elicit a passionate response. People either pepper their practice with deeper and deeper ones or they skip them whenever possible, dreading the inevitable discomfort. Those who avoid them mostly do so sheepishly, for what does it say about us if we dread backbends? These are poses that open the heart chakra, build courage and stamina, and give us the sort of energy that propels us to reach out toward others. Do we not value those benefits?

Chances are very good that if you are miserable in backbends, it's not that you don't value the benefits; it's more likely that you have never truly experienced them. Maybe you are stiff along the front body or have weak back muscles, or perhaps you instinctively know to protect a vulnerable heart from openings you are not ready for. If you have yet to find joy in opening the front body, it's time to develop a different approach to your practice.

### Honoring Resistance

The discipline of yoga is a purification practice, but not in the sense that we Americans seem so inclined to believe. The goal is purification not for the sake of perfection but for the sake of freedom. If you practice backbends intent upon eradicating aspects of yourself that you see as somehow "not measuring up," such as weak muscles, stiff joints, or protective insulation, you

succeed only in beating yourself up. There's no freedom on that path and, incidentally, no purification either. It's a path that leads only deeper into neuroses.

If the discipline of yoga is to bring greater freedom, you must practice backbends in a way that accepts and accommodates your resistance—even values and honors it—while still letting you receive the intended benefits. The point of this practice is not to become someone else but to become more fully yourself, to achieve not the glorious backbend pictured on a yoga calendar but the one that is at once stable and comfortable for your body and glows with an inner experience of joy, exhilaration, and freedom.

You're more likely to choose poses that honor your limits if you keep in mind the point of the practice, which in this case is opening the front of the body. You probably already do this instinctively after long periods of time spent hunched forward, whether over a computer, a patch in the garden, or something else. You know the stretch: arms reaching up and out, chest puffing forward, maybe even accompanied by a yawn or a growl. This informal backbend opens the muscles of the front body that tightened and shortened while you were pitched forward, and it offers the overstretched and fatigued back muscles relief by shortening them, flushing out waste, and bringing in a fresh supply of oxygenated blood. It feels great to open this way, doesn't it?

What makes this most natural of backbends especially pleasurable is that you rarely try to reach beyond your body's natural comfort level. You're not trying to achieve anything in particular, just instinctively going for the relief and exhilaration of the arch. If you can remind yourself that this revitalization is possible with even the simplest of poses, you will gravitate willingly and eagerly toward the practice of backbends.

### **Taking Only What You Need**

But sometimes even that natural impulse to arch backward is accompanied by an unexpected twinge of pain in the lower back. This is the area of the spine that typically bears the greatest strain during backbends, and if you tend to experience compression in the lower back during practice, you may decide that your body just doesn't bend backward with enough ease to garner the benefits of the practice. Fortunately, the breath can be used to create both comfort and control in backward-bending poses. Lifting and arching the chest on an inhalation and drawing the abdomen in to lengthen the lower back on an exhalation intentionally creates a shallower and more uniform arch. This also pulls the apex of the curve up and out of the lower back, where it tends to settle uncomfortably, and gives it a new home in the chest. Practiced this way, backbends are not only safer but easier to hold. Rather than struggling against the pose, you can relax into it and receive the gift of opening it has to offer.

Using the breath to control the depth and apex of a backbend offers an interesting encounter with *aparigraha*, the attitude that's described in [Patanjali's Yoga Sutra](#) as the ability to accept

only what is appropriate. You make a conscious choice not to take all you could, not to move into the fullest backward bend your body can manage, because you see value in holding back; you value the health and integrity of your body more than the glory of a deeper backbend. You value the primary function of the pose—the opening—more than the final shape or form of the posture.

This kind of restraint is so uncommon in our culture that it can feel quite unnatural. To embrace restraint, you might need to acknowledge how strongly it conflicts with the messages we regularly receive about what it means to be accomplished and successful. Like it or not, the culture we live in has a strong influence on our psyches. If you move into backbends without acknowledging their potential to collide with the values of yogic practice, doing your best can translate into doing your most. Not only can this lead to injury, but it can also sabotage the benefits of the practice altogether. If you want to give backbending your best effort and still remain true to the spirit of yogic practice, you have to remind yourself that success comes with taking only what you need from a pose—only what your body can appropriately use and no more.

If you pay close attention, the breath will tell you what you need and when you've gone too far. The breath is constant, but at the same time, it's ever-changing. It reflects the state of the body and mind in the most honest and direct way. Overeffort, strain, pain, anxiety, striving, frustration—all of these are revealed by the breath, and you can know your own mind better, and learn to work within your limits, if you learn how to interpret the sensation and sound of the breath.

The breath can also be used to connect your intention more fully with your physical body. In backbending, the connection is absolute. To set the tone for a skillful, compassionate backbending practice, start by giving yourself the space and freedom to observe the movement of the breath separately from the actions of backbending. To do this, lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor. Place your right hand on your upper chest and your left hand on your lower abdomen. Rest each elbow on a blanket so your arms can relax. As you inhale, feel the right hand move first as the lungs fill and the rib cage lifts and broadens. Gradually move the breath downward until the diaphragm moves down and the belly expands, lifting the left hand with it. Then exhale in reverse, beginning with a gentle contraction of the abdominal muscles under the left hand and then relaxing and releasing progressively upward until the diaphragm and muscles of the rib cage relax and the right hand settles.

Maintain the gentle contraction of the abdomen initiated during the exhalation throughout subsequent inhalations, first filling the upper lungs and lifting the rib cage. Maintain the lift of the rib cage in subsequent exhalations while reaffirming the contraction of your abdominal muscles. This subtle work of using the abdomen to stabilize the lower back and pelvis while reaching the chest forward lengthens the spine. Working backbends this way has a similar feel to opening an extension ladder: The base remains grounded, and the front spine becomes progressively longer. If the back of the ladder were becoming shorter, like the muscles of the back, extending

the ladder would create a long and graceful arch. This action becomes the mechanism by which you control how deeply you arch backward and where you locate the apex of your curve.

The breath can be a constant reminder of these actions, which you can work with in every backbend, from the most simple to the most complex. It can also serve as the ground for your intention—on the inhalation, you can extend compassionate care to yourself; on the exhalation, you can revel in pure sensation.

The attitude of compassion can start with choosing the poses that are most appropriate for your body. It's very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that simply because a pose exists, everyone should work toward being able to do it. Not every pose is appropriate for every body. If you're in pain while practicing a pose and cannot find adjustments that enable you to be in the pose comfortably, even with the advice and assistance of a trained instructor, then you must skillfully accept that the pose is not appropriate for your body at this time.

Most people with a healthy spine and normal flexibility will find variations of [Salabhasana](#) (Locust Pose), [Setu Bandha Sarvangasana](#) (Bridge Pose), and [Utkatasana](#) (Chair Pose) to be comfortably challenging and invigorating backbends. (If these poses leave you feeling unopened or unchallenged, however, your body is likely ready for deeper work and more challenging poses, and it would be unskillful for you to leave this more challenging work out of your [yoga practice](#). Remember, you're looking for what is appropriate for you individually.)

### **[Salabhasana](#) (Locust Pose)**

Salabhasana involves an active contraction of the back muscles to open the front body. This feels delicious when the back is strong and the front body is not overly restricted. Remind yourself that the primary purpose of backbends is to release tension along the front of the body, helping you feel more movement of breath and energy in those areas. As an active backbend, Salabhasana also offers the promise of strengthening muscles along the back of the body. In service of these intended benefits, try lifting your body only 50 percent as high as you comfortably can. Use the reserved energy and the mental space created to stay a few breaths longer than you might be able to if you were really pushing yourself. Then use the extra time to observe sensations and to maneuver within the pose.

To come into Salabhasana, lie facedown with your forehead on the floor and your arms alongside your body, palms down. Exhale and lengthen the lower back by drawing the belly gently toward the spine and pressing the pelvis and thighs toward the floor. Hold a subtle tension in the belly as you inhale and lift the chest and head. Exhale and again lengthen the lower back, drawing the belly gently toward the spine. Inhale, expanding the chest forward and at the same time pulling the apex of the arch from the lower back up to just behind your breastbone.

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Stay in touch with your level of exertion and any signs of resistance in your lower back. Resistance doesn't necessarily mean you should stop what you're doing, but it is a reminder to slow down and pay attention to what is happening. Lower the chest a bit to slow down and observe. Find space to move within the pose, to work the chest forward on your inhalations and lengthen the back on your exhalations.

Once you've mastered the action, begin to experiment with deepening the backbend, taking care to honor your own comfort level. Is there enough ease in your lumbar spine (in the lower back) to offer it a little more arch? Ideally, you want the lumbar spine and the cervical spine (in the neck) to arch without overcompressing and without compromising your ability to open the front of the thoracic spine (in the middle and upper back).

If you've lifted the apex of the curve upward and your lower back feels fine, release a little of the abdominal contraction at the end of your next inhalation, letting the lower back move a little farther forward. Work to keep the apex of the curve drawing upward, and support the lifting heart from underneath by bringing the shoulder blades firmly against the rib cage. Mirror the action of your chest with the base of your skull, extending it upward on an inhalation so the neck comes to its full length. Then look forward and up with the chin still slightly tucked, as if you were arching up and back over a large ball. The entire spine should lengthen and open into a long graceful bend, with no single part receiving a disproportionate share of the backbend. This feels glorious. Savor it.

If you want to move more deeply into the pose, add your legs, lifting them and stretching back through the heels. Every time you move, take only 50 percent of what is possible. Know that as the body opens, you can take another 10 percent—and another, and another. If you are still comfortable and want a bit more chest opening, lift the arms off the floor too. Keep them by your side and turn the palms to face each other, or interlace your fingers behind your back and stretch the knuckles back toward the heels. Just be sure to keep some extra wiggle room for observing and responding—the ultimate yogic conversation between body, breath, and mind.

Whenever you take all that your body will give, the question of when to come out of the pose never emerges. You come out when your body gasps "uncle." By contrast, working as you are here, and as the Yoga Sutra advises—balancing *sthira* (steadiness) and *sukha* (ease)—there is room to observe cues that the quality of your effort is beginning to wane and it's time to rest. Do you have less control over the subtle actions of controlling depth and apex? Is your breath beginning to lose its smooth, easy rhythm? When your resistance to remaining in the pose overpowers the conversation of your body, it is time to come out. Lie down slowly, turning your head to one side and resting your arms alongside the torso, palms rolling up toward the ceiling. Listen to the echoes of the pose reverberating throughout your body. Enjoy the total release of effort and observe the new quality of your energy. After a while, push back into [Balasana](#) (Child's Pose).

### **Utkatasana (Chair Pose)**

Salabhasana is quite challenging for those who have a long torso, a stiff front body, and weak back muscles. If this is the case for you, try Utkatasana instead. Like Salabhasana, Utkatasana is an active backbend. It can challenge the back muscles to develop strength, but it does so using gravity, which makes it easier for weaker backs. To come into the pose, stand in **Tadasana**(Mountain Pose), with your feet parallel and hip width apart. On an inhalation, raise the arms overhead. On an exhalation, bend your knees as if to sit in a chair as you bring your hands to the thighs. To keep your knees safe, be sure they track directly forward in line with the toes. The closer the thighs come to parallel with the floor, the more challenging the pose, both for your legs and your back. Remind yourself to work at 50 percent so you have plenty of space to make subtle adjustments.

On each inhalation, lift the chest away from the thighs, pulling the apex of the curve into the thoracic spine. On each exhalation, gently contract the abdominal muscles, tucking the tailbone under and lengthening the lower back. Stabilize the pose by reaching into the four corners of each foot, most strongly into the inner and outer edges of each heel to encourage length in the lower back.

If your body calls for more opening and a stronger surge of energy, bring your arms straight out in front of you and parallel to the floor. For an even stronger position, reach the arms overhead. Keep adjusting the depth and apex with each position change. When you are ready to come out of the pose, return to Tadasana, releasing your arms down to your sides, and take several breaths.

### **Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)**

Perhaps the kindest of the lot, Setu Bandha Sarvangasana is a passive arch for the back; it allows the back muscles to completely relax as the front body opens, with the legs and hips taking on most of the work. To come into the pose, lie down on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor hip width apart. Press into the feet to lengthen the lower back, bringing it into contact with the floor. Continue pressing through the feet as the knees reach away from the shoulders, lifting the buttocks and increasingly more of the back from the floor. Remind yourself that this is a pose in which your back muscles can actually relax while your legs do the work of opening the front body. By keeping the effort at 50 percent, you'll find space to enjoy the drape of the back from the pelvis down toward the shoulders, relaxing into the force of gravity.

Let the arms remain passive on the floor or, if your chest is flexible enough to permit, bring them under your back, interlacing your fingers and straightening the arms as much as possible. Either way, reach the arms, like the legs, toward the floor to support the arch of the pose. Once you're

situated, settle into a rhythm of breathing in as you extend the chest toward both ceiling and chin and breathing out as you lengthen the lower back. Try reaching strongly through the heels, contracting the hamstrings to pull the sitting bones toward the back knees. As the hamstrings contract, the lower back is pulled long from below.

This is a wonderful action to call upon in any backbend. When you are able to lengthen the lower back by tugging the back of the pelvis down with your hamstrings, the front body becomes more available to lengthen and open. If you struggle with the comfort of your lower back in backbends, however, you may still find the most comfort by continuing to stabilize and lengthen the lumbar spine at least partially through the contraction of your abdominal muscles.

When you are ready to come out of the pose, release the arms out from under you and slowly return the spine to the floor, one vertebra at a time. Rest a moment with the knees bent and the feet on the floor to observe new sensations and to relax.

### **Seeing With Compassion**

When you practice backbends this way—honoring resistance, working with integrity and sensitivity—the result is not only more access to the benefits of backbends but an inevitable transformation of the elements within you that initially resisted the practice. Your joints open more, you become stronger and more flexible, and your heart opens into greater self-acceptance and compassion for others. So why not start with those intentions? Why not practice with the aims of increasing your flexibility, deepening your arch, banishing your fears? Why should you honor and accommodate your resistance rather than directing your practice of backbends toward eliminating the cause of that resistance?

Because any effort to eliminate a part of yourself or your experience is a treacherous practice, and where it leads depends upon your mental training. Can you acknowledge your resistance without judging it? Are you able to see weak back muscles as simply that and not as somehow connected to your value as a human being? That might seem easy, but what about when you look at something deeper, such as a protective barrier around the heart chakra? Can you observe that with understanding and equanimity? If you seek to eliminate your resistance because you feel it reflects badly on you as a person, your practice will be filled with negativity and self-loathing. That is a practice of purification for the sake of perfection, and it leads only to deeper entrapment in suffering.

But what if you do have the ability to look at yourself closely, compassionately, and with equanimity? Can you then meet your resistance head-on? Well, here's the interesting thing: A mind trained in equanimity doesn't push unwanted things away or grasp desired things closer. It honors and accommodates, knowing that such treatment is transformational. Ultimately, it is only in letting go of what you wish you could be, in seeking greater freedom to be who you actually are at any given moment, that the process of your becoming unfolds. So, practice

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enjoying the backbends that your body enjoys without forcing yourself into poses that reflect only what you wish your body could enjoy. Let each arch be an exercise in acceptance and equanimity, an active embrace of the sanctuary that yoga can offer, and a simple acknowledgement of a truth that might just change your whole life.

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