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Ram Dass on
failing to love



asana at home

BODY WORK

BY SANDY BLAINE

Open up!

a sequence of simple backbends

One great benefit of bringing your asana practice home is the opportunity to tailor it to your individual needs. One size does not fit all in yoga, and your practice becomes more meaningful as you gear it toward your own needs as they change from day to day. Creating a home practice teaches you to listen to your inner self, and as you do, you will begin to understand what you need from your practice each day. And as you learn to trust your intuition, your mind/body connection will grow and your practice will become more rewarding.

When you begin to practice without the guidance of a teacher, a basic practice is best. Then, as your home practice develops and your knowledge and confidence grow through experience, you can gradually build in more variety to keep you fresh and motivated. A varied practice is more beneficial than practicing the same poses every day. And even though most people gravitate naturally to the asanas that come easily, a balanced, nourishing practice will also include those poses you might prefer to avoid. In terms of physical health, it is important to counter your weaknesses as well as enjoy your strengths.

It is human nature to avoid movements that do not come naturally, which is why we tend to follow the path of least resistance. In practical terms, that means our bodies have an affinity for some movements and activities, and an aversion to others. Over time, this tendency to develop our strengths and avoid our weaknesses results in the physical imbalances that express themselves as the creaks

and twinges of middle age. Asana can prevent this. It is invaluable for opening underused areas, changing muscular patterns, and improving physical equilibrium. And as our bodies become freer and more balanced in the course of regularly practicing a range of asanas, many of the knots and aches that we have come to regard as inevitable “miraculously” disappear. But this requires confronting our resistance and exploring ways to overcome it by moving through it rather than around it.

Backbends

Typically, you either love them or hate them, at least to start with, but either way, backbends are an integral part of a well-rounded practice. They lengthen and open the front of the body; they require deep spinal extension as opposed to the flexion associated with forward bends (which open the back of the body and lengthen the posterior spine).

Backbends are associated with the sunrise, with waking up and moving joyfully into the world, with expansion, growth, and embracing life. They are often referred to as “heart-opening poses,” and indeed, opening the front of the body with backbends stretches the muscles that surround the heart and lungs (the pectorals, the rotator cuff group, the deltoids, and intercostals) and expands both breath capacity and emotional openness as more space opens in the chest. The muscles that connect the front of the skeleton and allow the spine to extend (including the thighs, hip flexors, and >>>

asana at home

abdominal wall as well as the upper torso) may protest at first as they are asked to awaken and release, but with practice, backbends create great freedom of movement and breath.

Paradoxically, though moving deeper into backbends requires both energy and strength, backbends also build strength and create energy. In any stretch, one muscle or set of muscles is strengthened through contracting to lengthen the opposing one; in backbends, the whole back of the body works to open the front, creating stronger back muscles along with ease of movement in the spine. In addition, opening the lungs allows them to deliver more oxygen to the body, thus nourishing and energizing the cells. As the spine becomes more supple, the back stronger, and the lungs able to open more fully and easily, the body is rejuvenated, becoming energized and youthful. These poses are a wonderful addition to your personal practice and will confer many benefits over time, including:

- improved spinal movement and alignment
- strong, healthy back muscles
- increased range of motion in hip and shoulder joints
- release of neck and shoulder tension
- increased freedom and volume of breath

- improved function of the abdominal organs, including better digestion
- more energy
- enhanced mental alertness

Beyond the practical health benefits, asana is also a tool for self-investigation. As your practice deepens, it is important to explore all sides of your nature—the difficult and darker places as well as the joyful and easy ones. Asana can provide a laboratory for this exploration, and looking at how you respond to more challenging postures can be a profound learning experience, both physically and mentally. Whether it is asana or any other aspect of yoga, practice is about growth. If you do only what you like, you don't change and grow. But if you do only what's difficult, you won't have much joy. Practice should foster both joy and growth; it's the combination that will motivate your continued practice.

Including a backbend-focused session once a week is a good prescription for your daily practice program. For some, backbends come naturally, but more frequently the extreme opening and energy required is daunting for the new asana practitioner. If you enjoy backbends from the outset, your backbend days are ones to look forward to; if backbends feel intimidating at first, these will be the days that challenge you more. No matter what your starting point, with practice these poses will become ever

more comfortable and enjoyable. On a day when you come to your mat feeling sluggish or heavyhearted, a simple backbend practice can enliven your energy and spirits. And on a day when you are already energized, working with the more challenging backbends that expand your limits will increase your vitality and confidence.

The sequence that follows assumes that you are already familiar with the basic postures. It offers a simple beginning backbend practice that will deepen gradually—each posture helps warm up the muscles that need to open in the next pose. For example, the opening of the side ribs as you stretch your arms overhead in *parvotasana* creates more space for your breath, and this upper body expansion prepares the shoulder joints for the deeper movements of backbends. As key joints and muscles become warmer and looser, the spine moves more freely into extension.

Backbends are strenuous, and working toward them should be a gentle, gradual process. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind as you begin:

It is always best to learn new asanas from a qualified teacher before attempting them on your own. Work with care, patience, and attention, and never force or push yourself into a backbend; if your strength overpowers your flexibility, you could damage your spine.

Even those with naturally supple spines need to learn to

extend evenly through the entire spinal column rather than bending at just the most flexible points—continually overusing the lumbar spine will eventually cause injury.

Note also that backbends are not recommended for those with heart problems or high blood pressure, and deeper, intermediate-level backbends such as *dhanurasana* are considered too strenuous to be practiced during pregnancy or menstruation.

As you move through your practice, aim for 30–60 seconds in each asana, but don't struggle to hold poses longer than feels comfortable. It's always fine to rest

between poses; your endurance will increase with practice.

Repetition is important; some of these poses may feel tiring while you are holding them, but they should feel easier and more enjoyable with each attempt. So try *dhanurasana*, for example, a few times before you start cooling down, and notice how the last repetition differs from the first.

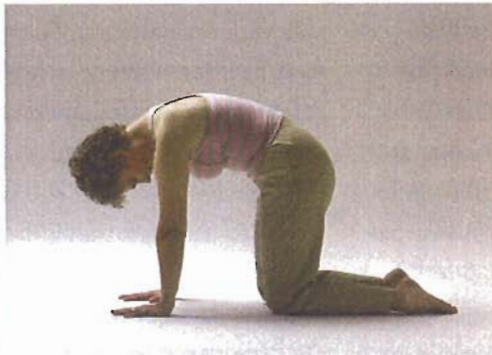
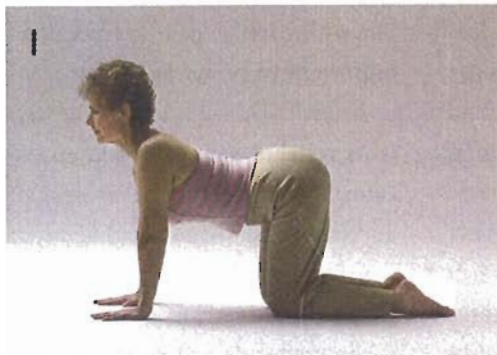
Your breath should be gentle, natural, and continuous. If it becomes harsh or labored, come out of the pose and relax in child's pose, or lie on your back with your knees up, feet flat on the floor.

Always release the spine with some seated and reclined twists followed by very gentle reclined flex-

ion movements (for example, bringing one knee at a time toward your chest, and then both together) after your backbends. Counterposes and a cooling-down period are an integral part of any practice session, but with backbends it is especially important to bring the spine back to neutral. This will soothe the nervous system so that you end up calm and relaxed as well as open and energized. You should leave your backbend practice feeling rejuvenated and ready to face the world with open arms and an open heart. >>>



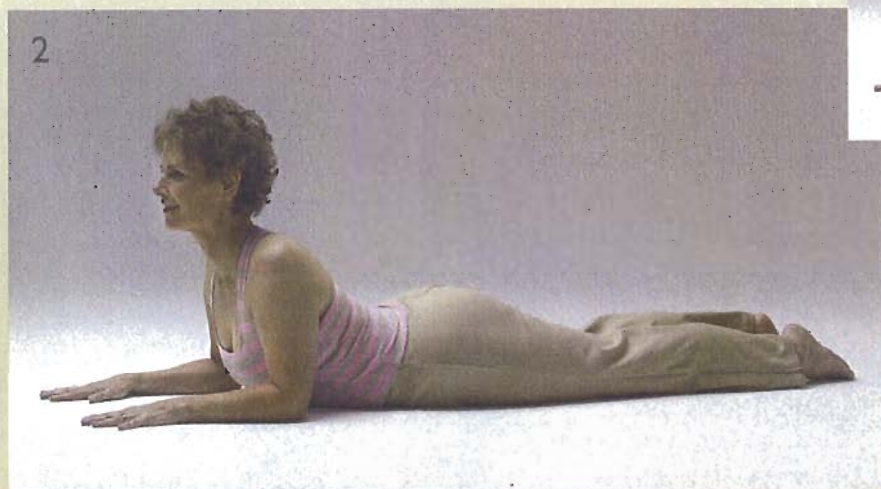
the backbending sequence



▲ cat pose

This pose loosens the spine and the muscles in the hip and shoulder joints. Aligning the wrists directly under the shoulders will give maximum range of motion. Try not to sink onto the arms, but stay light through the shoulder girdle and relaxed at the base of the skull.

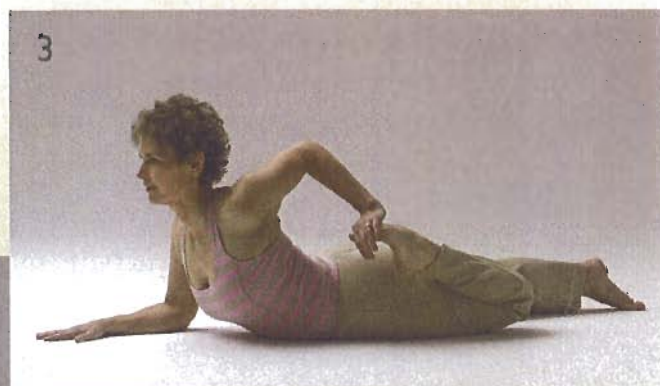
Working with the eyes closed will help you focus as you move with your breath, inhaling as you extend (arch) your back and exhaling as you move into flexion (rounding the spine and dropping the head)



▲ sphinx pose

Sphinx is a bit more supported than cobra pose and easier on the lower back. The forearms stay on the floor with the elbows bent to 90 degrees directly under the shoulders. The tops of the thighbones are grounded and the legs lengthen backward as the spine moves forward. Use the arms to help draw the spine out of the pelvis.

Take care to stay relaxed at the base of the skull, emphasizing the forward rather than the upward movement in the backbend.



▲ half bhekasana

This pose lengthens the quadriceps and hip flexors in preparation for more challenging backbends. From sphinx, support your torso on your right arm, bend your left knee, and catch your foot with your left hand, bringing it toward your left hip. Try to keep the weight evenly distributed on your two hip bones.

To complete the pose, turn the head and chest forward, continuing to lengthen the spine away from the legs. Repeat on the other side. If this doesn't feel good for your lower back, do just the thigh stretch and keep your head down, resting on your opposite arm.

sluggish or heavyhearted, a simple backbend practice enlivens your energy.

virasana ▶

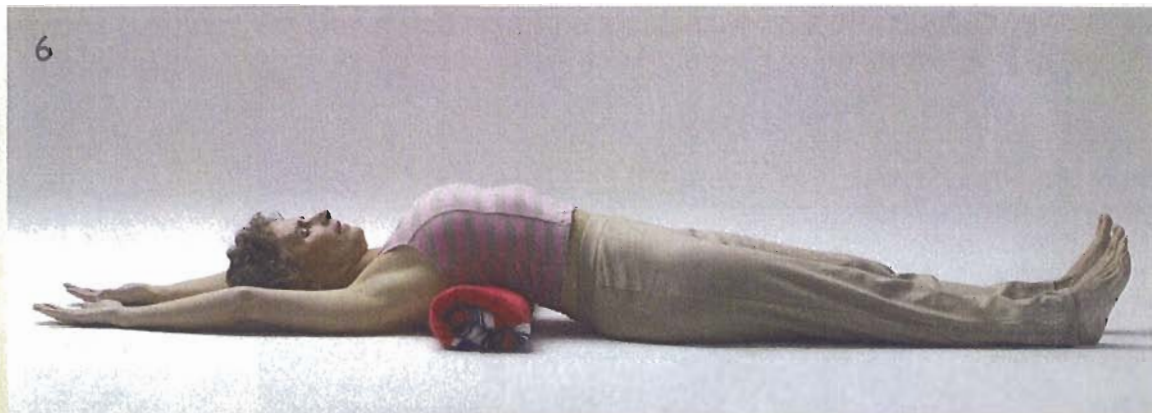
Now that the thighs are stretched and warm, this classic meditation position should feel a bit more friendly for the knees, but for complete comfort take care to sit high enough on a block or pillow.

The sacrum moves in toward the belly to support a long spine, the shoulders stay relaxed, and while the knees don't have to touch, they should move toward each other, coming inside the width of the hips.



◀ **shoulder stretch in virasana**

This basic shoulder stretch opens the intercostal muscles as well as the shoulder joints. The fingers are interlaced, palms turned upward. The arms move toward each other and up, with the shoulder blades lifting while the tops of the shoulders stay soft and relaxed.



▲ **backbend over a prop**

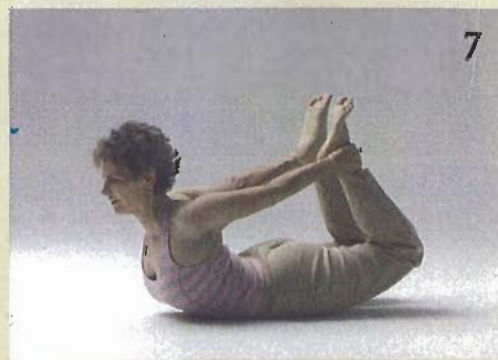
This passive backbend uses gravity and relaxation to open the chest, spine, and shoulders, and is especially good for digestion. The upper back is supported at the shoulder blades, so the apex of the stretch is at the sternum. The head should be supported so that the neck can stay relaxed and neutral.

The arms can be at the sides in a "T" position, the backs of the hands resting comfortably on the floor. Or, if it isn't a strain, the arms can reach overhead, away from the legs, bringing even more length to the spine. Take care that the lower back is comfortable.

dhanurasana ▶

Bow pose builds on all the preparatory backbends, creating even more opening in the chest. Use the strength of your legs to lift your chest off the floor. As the legs continue to draw your weight up and back, lift the heart up and stretch forward through the chest, enjoying your breath as your lungs expand.

Keep the face and the base of the skull relaxed, and hold the pose as long as it is comfortable and the breath is soft. Repeat this pose two or three times if time allows. >>>



With backbends it is important to bring the spine back to neutral.

counterposes & cooldowns

10



▲ child's pose

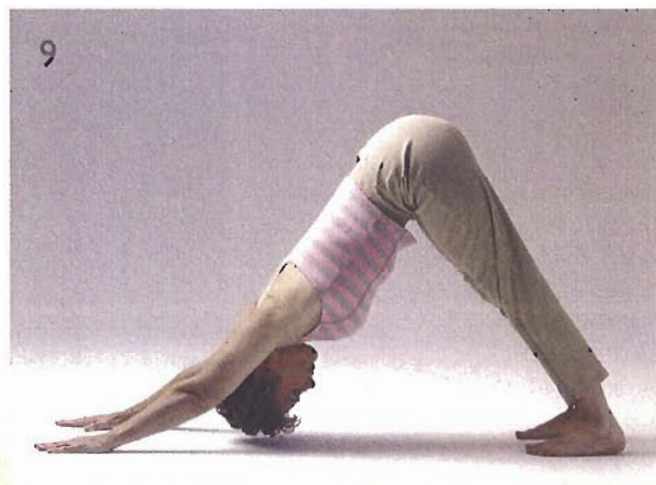
This brings the pelvis into gentle flexion and widens the lower back. It provides a soothing counter-movement for the entire spine, especially the sacroiliac joints.

From your hands and knees, bring your feet together so your big toes touch, and your knees are wider apart than your hips. Your feet are under your sit bones but there's space between your thighs for your belly to relax. Rest your outer ribs on your inner thighs, and your head in front of you, either on the floor or on folded arms.



▲ reclined twist

Twists are neutralizing poses, great for bringing the spine back to its natural alignment by balancing both sides. They are essential after backbends. This reclined twist helps to relax the muscles of the back after contracting to extend the spine.



downward dog ▲

This is a more active counterpose for the spine and the hips, providing more flexion to neutralize the sacroiliac after the energetic extension of the backbends. It also opens the backs of the legs again after the hamstring-contracting movements of dhanurasana.

And finally, bringing the head below the heart is restful for the neck and for the nervous system, so make sure to let the head hang down from the spine as you lift through your tailbone.

This soothes the nervous system so that you end up calm and relaxed.



◀ **reclined hip stretch**

This basic hip stretch for outer rotation (with one ankle crossed over the opposite knee) widens the lower back further and reopens the hip rotators, which contract to bring the body into active backbends. If you have tight hips, you will definitely want to develop the habit of stretching them back out after backbends so you don't inadvertently tighten them more!

relaxation & integration



shavasana ▲

Supporting the knees in shavasana is always a nice treat. Following a back-bending practice, it is especially soothing to the lower back to have the knees elevated.

Northern California writer and yoga teacher Sandy Blaine has been practicing yoga for 18 years, and is writing a book about home practice. She teaches asana classes in the Bay Area, where she is co-director of the Alameda Yoga Station (www.AlamedaYogaStation.com), and a faculty member of the Berkeley Yoga Room's teacher-training program (www.YogaRoomBerkeley.com).

there's more...

If you've already established a home practice but it's beginning to feel stale, see *Points of Practice*, p. 36, for help.