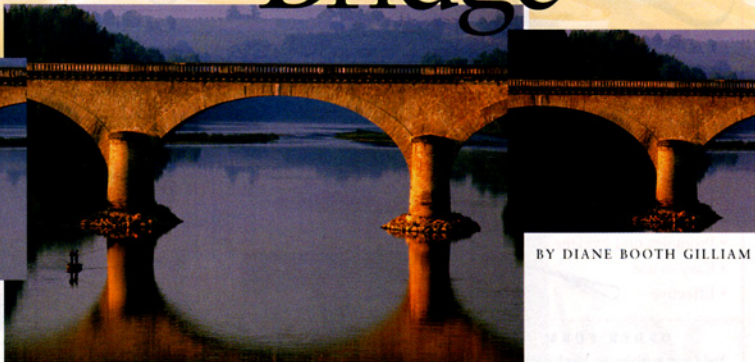


honoring the Bridge



BY DIANE BOOTH GILLIAM

A noble old bridge

stands in the state of Montana, spanning the Missouri, one of the hauntingly powerful rivers of the West. I spent my childhood there, immersed in the sparse innocence of rural life.

Even after a sleek new bridge was erected upstream, my family still used the old bridge. We preferred to cross from one riverbank to the other slowly, listening as the wooden slats and metal pins clinked and rattled under car tires rolling along. I remember kneeling on the back seat to peer down at the mighty river, rushing along so swiftly. Dad steered us across intently. Our voyage across the old bridge was always taken with some sort of

deep intention and great care. It seemed like a long, important journey from one side to the other, and I loved it.

Bridges, by their very nature, ease the passage from one side to another. They symbolize union.

And union, in the Sanskrit language, translates into “yoga.” In the depths of our yoga practices, we can embrace union, and ultimately transcend duality. A hatha yoga posture that can encourage this experience and awareness is aptly called *setu bandhasana*, the bridge pose.

The following version of the bridge pose is appropriate for just about anyone, from complete

novice to advanced hatha yoga practitioner. Let's try it. Lie down on your back on the floor. Bend the knees and place your feet close to your torso, so the backs of the heels are planted about five or six inches from the buttocks. Rest the soles of the feet flat on the floor with the inner edges of the big toes touching and the heels slightly separated. The hands also rest on the floor, a comfortable distance away from the torso, palms gently turned upward.

Press your feet down, lifting your hips just an inch off the floor. It's important that the hips be just barely raised—an inch or so is the limit. Keep the knees very close to one another, even touching. Take time to notice your back and spine. Let your lower back relax.

Give yourself the opportunity here to become aware of your sensations. Notice which areas of your back are up off the floor. Then, with buttocks relaxed and knees still close together, slowly roll your spine back down. See if you can roll down one vertebra at a time, starting with the upper back. When you land, let the hips rest fully into the support of the solid earth. Repeat that five times, lifting up and pausing to notice your sensations, then rolling back down. Each time, invite yourself to slow down a little more and breathe evenly.

The next phase of the posture starts the same way. Press your feet into the floor, knees touching, and barely lift your hips. Just hang there. Soften the buttocks and let the back of your waist relax. You might start quaking or aching. These are good, albeit unusual, sensations indicating that you are working deep, where it's been tight and closed. Breathe, and say hopeful things and kind words to yourself. Or, better yet, practice mantra repetition. Hang there, dangle and breathe.

If your mind protests, or if the sensations are so unusual that you want out, remember that your legs hold you up every day. They really can easily support your hips an inch off the floor for a minute or two. Recognize mind chatter for what it is: resistance to the opening up of deep places in your body. Invite yourself back to your breath and mantra. Hang there, and let the bridge work.

After a minute or two (or three to five minutes if you're up to it), slowly roll back down. Let your hips sink into the floor, resting. Move the feet farther apart. Lean the knees into one another. Let go. There is nothing more to hold up. Let the bliss of deep release flood your being.

When teaching the bridge to my hatha yoga students, I'll offer a lot of encouragement in the hanging phase of the pose. Often, I'll suggest that they send out sound with their exhalations. This can usher in a deeper experience. It's freeing to release sound without

judging it. It brings forth an opening, a letting go, a sinking into the union that is yoga.

Yoga is union, bridging our humanness with our transcendent self. In my day-to-day life, I still slide back and forth, sometimes slipping into an old habit of seeing separation, then rising again into union, where all is truly one. Those are the moments I live for. That's the power of yoga.

The bridge of my childhood still stands under vast blue skies, while the river rushes beneath it. Like the noble old bridge, this version of *setu bandhasana*, the bridge pose, eases our passage from one shore to another, fulfilling our sense of union. ■

Diane Booth Gilliam has taught hatha yoga for 24 years. For more information, visit her website, www.releasewithyoga.com

