

Backward Bends

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE



Effects & Benefits

- Releases the muscles and fascia of the front body
- An antidote for the movements and habits of every-day life
- Strengthens the back of the body
- Improves posture
- Awakens the nervous system
- Uplifting, energising
- Helpful for lifting low mood or depression
- Creates expansion of the breath
- Connects us to the heart (anahata chakra)
- Builds courage - empowering
- Brings awareness and connection to an unseen part of the body
- An opportunity for incorporating the yamas and niyamas into your practice

“Rather than measure your progress by how much you can bend your back, judge your progress in terms of how much easier it is to sit, stand, and walk with your back firmly and easily upright throughout the day”

Donna Farhi

Anatomy of Backward Bends

Movement of the spine: extension

Natural curves of the lumbar and cervical spine means that these areas extend more easily

Average range of movement:

Cervical spine (neck): 20° - 60°

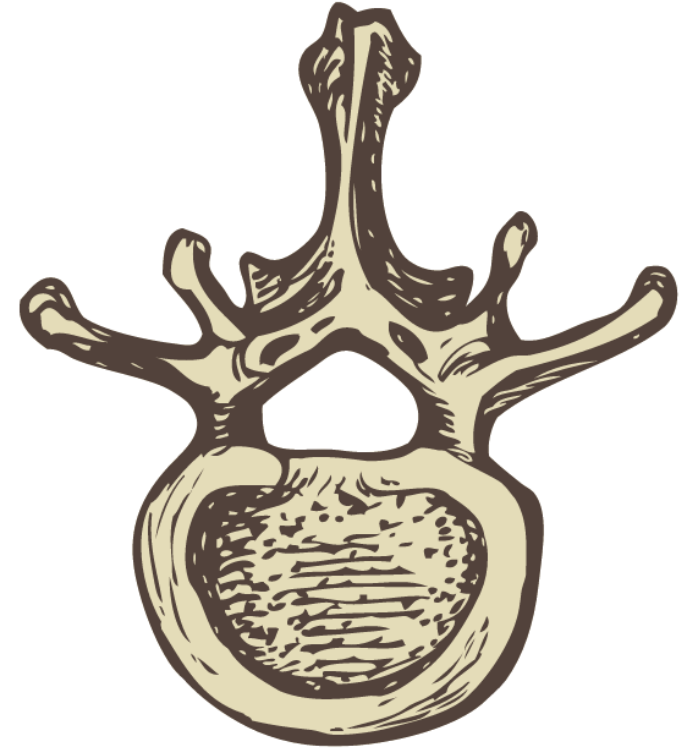
Thoracic spine (chest): 20° - 30°

Lumbar spine (low back): 20° - 45°

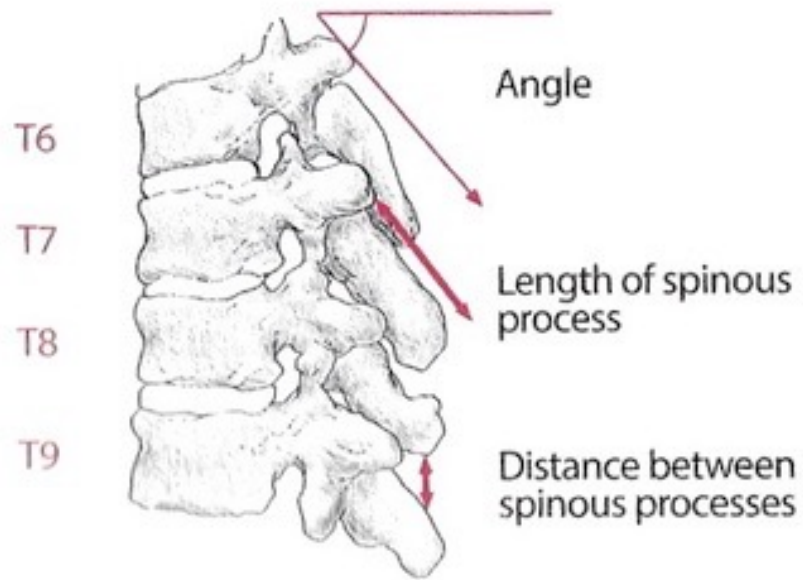
Ref: Judith Hansen-Lasater and Mary Richards: Experiential Anatomy

Structure of the Vertebrae

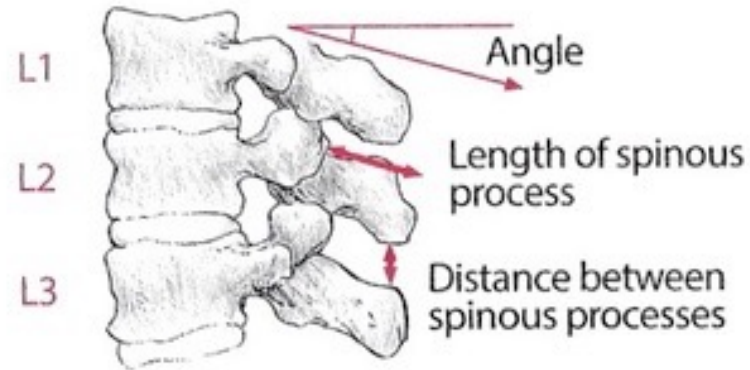
- Vertebrae consist of main body and bony projections – processes.
- As we backbend, spinous processes butt up against each other
- Length and angle of the spinous processes affect the range of movement



Spinous processes of thoracic spine (a) are longer, closer together and at a sharper downward angle than the lumbar spine (b), so they butt against each other more quickly than those of the lumbar spine



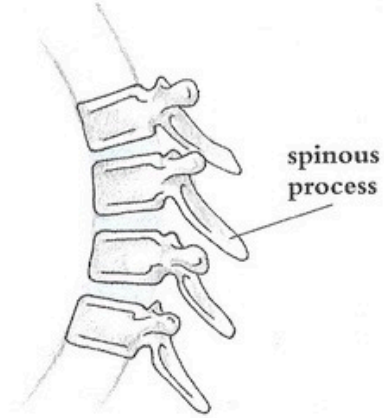
a)



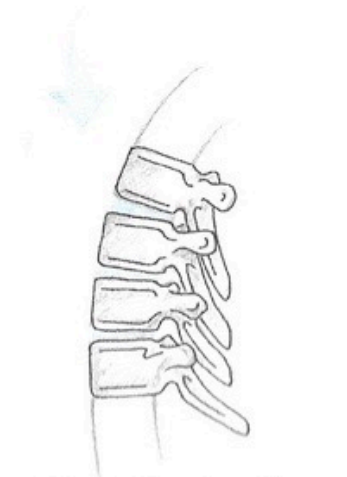
b)

Image credit: Your Spine, Your Yoga
Bernie Clark

A normal thoracic spine

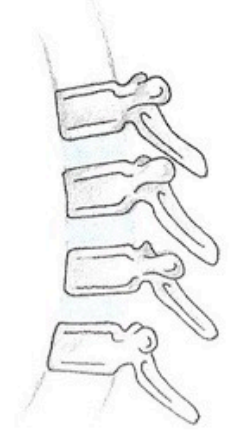


when moved into extension

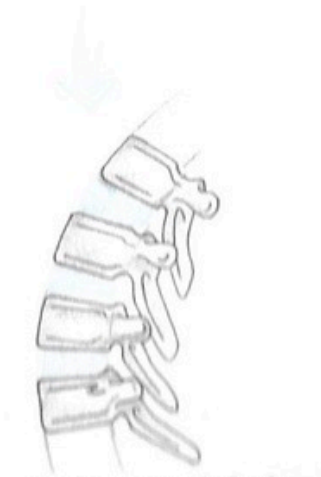


is limited by the spinous processes wedging against each other.

An elongated thoracic spine



when moved into extension



can bend much farther because of the space between the vertebrae.

Muscles of Backward Bends

Prime Movers (engaged/working):

Back muscles (erector spinae)

Hamstrings

Gluteus Maximus

Antagonists (releasing):

Hip Flexors (Psoas Major,
Iliacus)

Quads (Rectus Femoris)

Abdominals (Rectus Abdominis)

The psoas

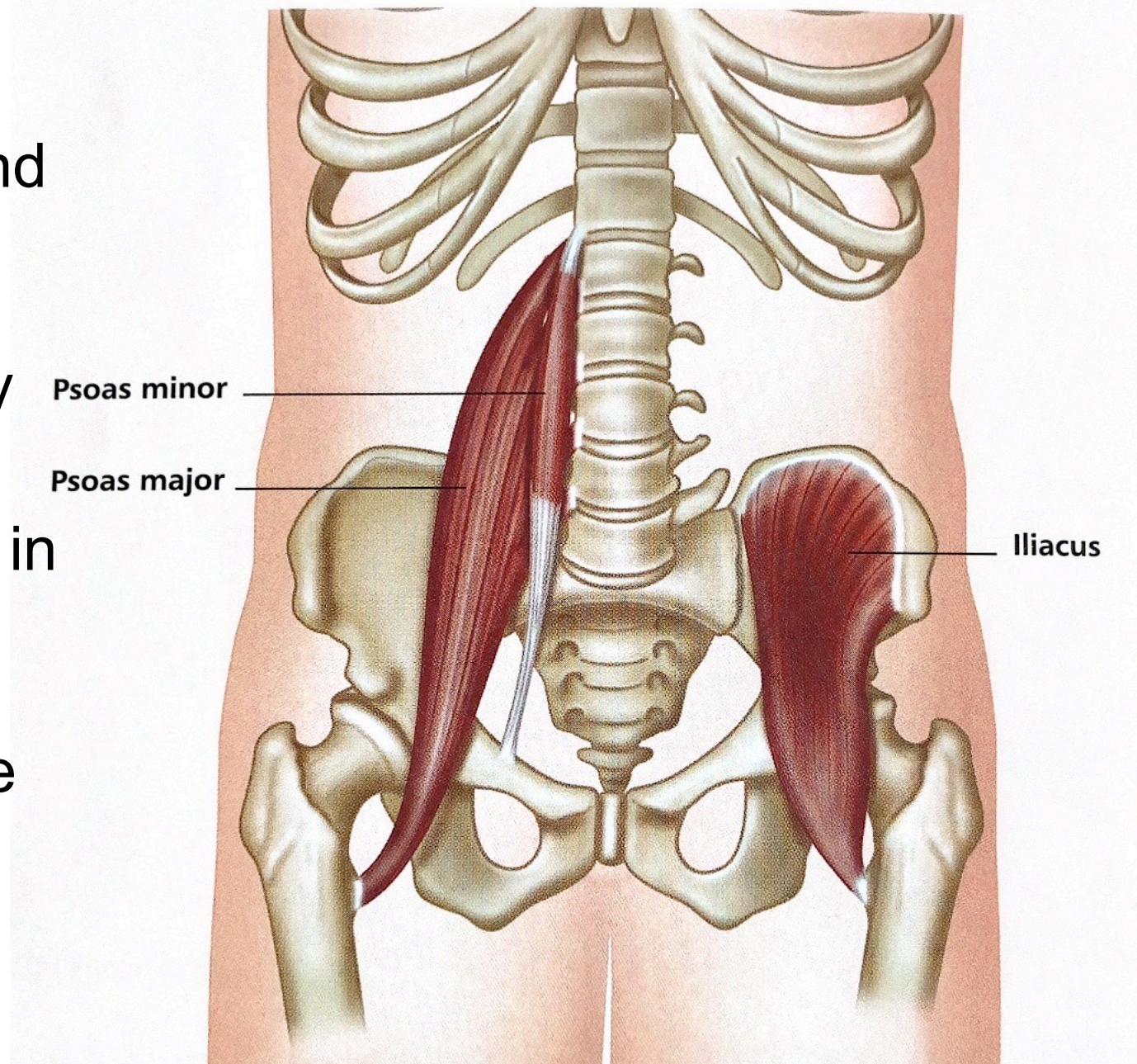
Attachments: Spine (T12/L5) and thigh bone

Connects upper and lower body

A core muscle – significant role in posture, alignment, balance

Connected through fascia to the diaphragm

Involved in the stress response



The debate about the glutes...

- Do we contract or soften the glutes in backbends???
- Many opposing views...
- The 'contractors' say that this helps create more stability in the pelvis and prevents loading into the lumbar spine
- The 'softeners' say that contracting can pinch the joints of the pelvis and compress the lumbar
- Utilise natural engagement; avoid gripping + external rotation of thighs



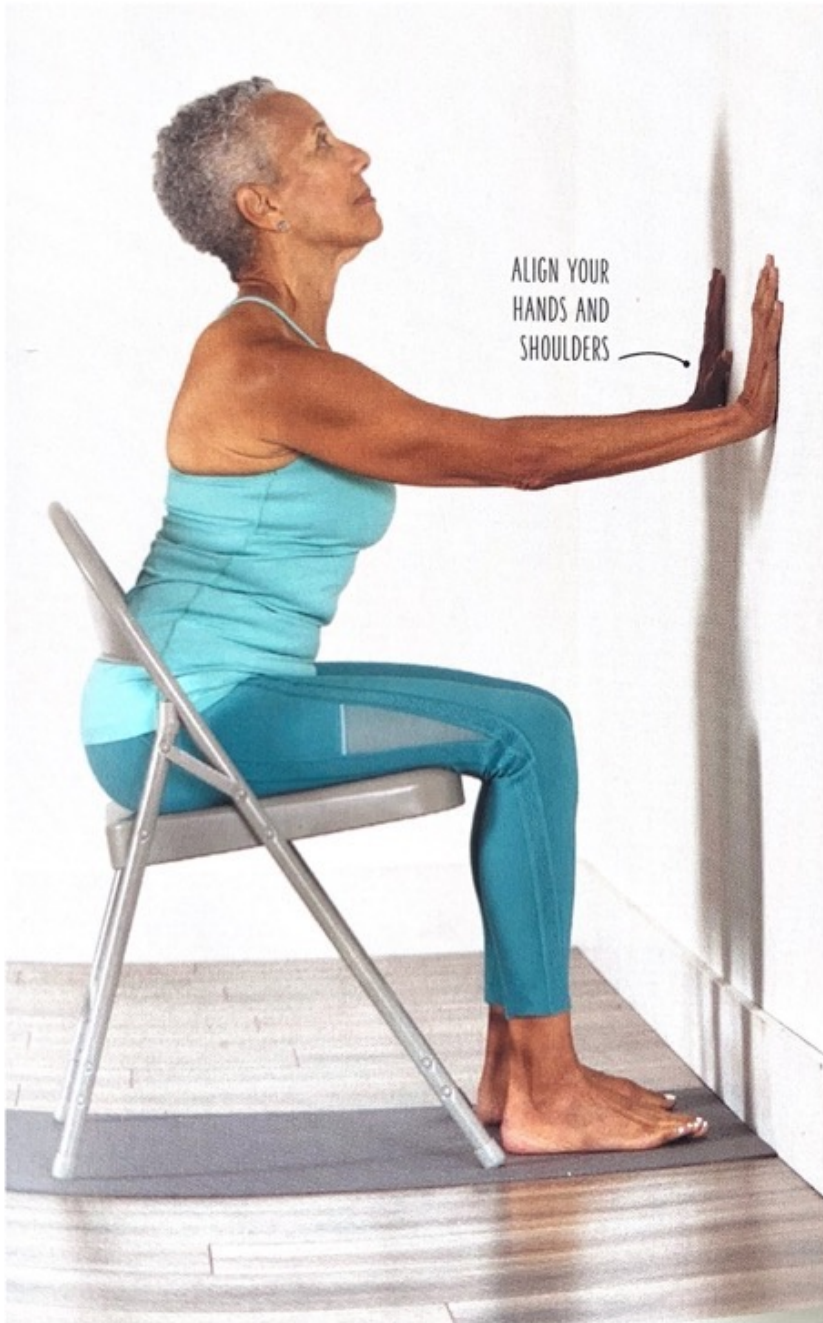


The Role of Gravity

Do we work with or against gravity in backbends? It depends...

What might restrict the movement?

- Tight; psoas / quads / abs / fascia front line of the body
- Weak back muscles
- Structural: bony structure of the spine (spinous processes)
- Structural: depth of intervertebral discs
- Vulnerability / Fear factor
- Rushing and end-gaming
- Changes in spinous processes with age



How can we make backward bends more accessible?

- Use of props: blocks, bricks, bolster/pillow, wall
- Break the posture into accessible 'layers'
- Can you think of any others?

Image credit: Yoga for Everyone, Dianne Bondy

When practicing...

- Create spaciousness along the entire spine
- Taking the head back? Remember weight of head from Day 1
- Engage core muscles to help stabilise and support the lower back
- Maintain an even breathing pattern
- Encourage expansion and extension
- Feeling the posture as a “whole body expression” (Donna Farhi)
- Avoid feelings of compression or pinching in the lower back and neck
- Internal rotation of the thighs (if there is compression in lower back)



Preparing & Counterpose

Preparing the body:

- Release psoas and quads e.g. lunge, warrior 1
- Wake up the spine through its full range of movement
- 'Lengthen' the spine (axial extension) e.g. Dog, Swan.
- Warm up the shoulders / shoulder blades

Counterposes:

- Neutral spine e.g. tadasana, dandasana, swan, semi supine
- Gentle twists
- Apanasana
- Remember: a counterpose should be more subtle than the original posture

Ahimsa: applying non-harm in asana

The following may require backward bends to be practiced with caution, modification or omission...

- Back pain (but... it depends. Backbends may be helpful, depending on the cause of the pain)
- Spondylosis / spondylolisthesis (contraindicated – do not practice)
- Spinal stenosis
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Neck injury or weakness
- Hiatus hernia
- Recent abdominal surgery
- Pregnancy (depending on term)

Backward Bending Asana of the Syllabus



- Dwi Pada Pitham (Two Foot Support / Bridge)
- Ustrasana (Camel)
- Salabasana (Locust)
- Bhujangasana (Cobra)

The 8 Limbs of Yoga: Asana

- **Developing the body for meditation**
- **Releasing tension - freeing the flow of energy**

And...

- **Body intelligence - learning to understand your body**
- **Restore & maintain balance**
- **Functional: stability, strength, flexibility, mobility**
- **Systems: respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular etc...**
- **Emotionally: courage, adaptability, kindness, confidence**

“The true value of (the) postures lies in their functional benefit to our own body” Gary Krafstow

Sutra 2.46 sthirasukham asanam

Sthira: steady, stable

Sukham: ease, relaxed, good space

Asanam: posture

A stable and comfortable posture is asana

“The Goldilocks Philosophy” (Bernie Clark)

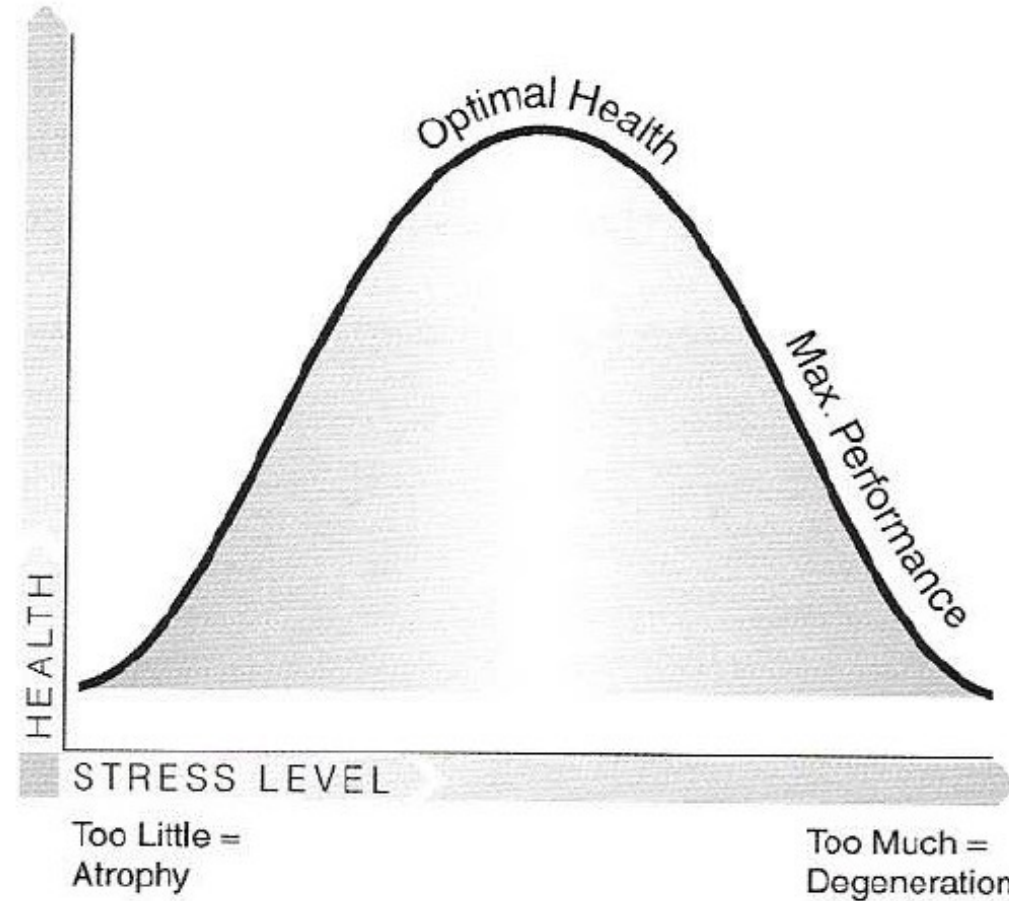


FIGURE 1.17 Stress versus health. To optimize health, we need an appropriate amount of stress—neither too much nor too little. This is the Goldilocks Curve.

The 8 Limbs of Yoga: Asana

“No one is average.

This means that whatever works for ‘an average person’ (who does not actually exist) may not work for you...

There is no normal and no abnormal.
There is only you in all your uniqueness.”

Bernie Clark

Today's practice...

Prepare...

- Spine: awaken | lengthen
- Hip flexors, quads – release & stretch
- Shoulders

Intention & Awareness...

- Stirha sukham
- Breath initiates movement
- Axial extension (lengthen spine)
- Spaciousness versus compression
- Connection to the heart

Sources of inspiration:

- David Coulter
- Judith Hanson Lasater
- Donna Farhi
- Mark Stephens
- Bernie Clark
- Jason Crandell
- Peter Blackaby

Images (where not already specified):

Psoas image: “The Vital Psoas Muscle” Jo Ann Staugaard-Jones
Canva