

# Turning Upside Down: the Benefits of Headstand and Shoulder Stand

by Pam Werner

## A General Look at Inversions

Inverted poses are an extremely important group of asanas. Inverted asanas reverse the action of gravity on the body; instead of everything being pulled towards the feet, the orientation shifts towards the head. Similarly, on the emotional and psychic levels, inverted asanas turn everything upside down, throwing a new light on old patterns of behavior and being. Generally, these practices improve health, reduce anxiety and stress and increase self-confidence. They also increase mental power, concentration and stimulate the chakras.

There are four major systems in the body that the practice of inversions positively influences: cardiovascular, lymphatic, nervous, and endocrine.

The circulatory system is comprised of the heart, lungs and the entire system of vessels that feed oxygen and collect carbon dioxide and other waste products from the cells. Arteries fan out in an intricate tributary system from the heart, which pumps freshly oxygenated blood from the lungs outward. Veins return blood to the heart and, unlike arteries, make up a low-pressure system that depends on muscular movement or gravity to move blood along. One-way valves at regular intervals prevent backwash and keep fluids moving towards the heart in a system known as venous return. Turning yourself upside down encourages venous return.

Inversions also ensure healthier and more effective lung tissue. When standing or sitting upright, gravity pulls our fluids earthward, and blood "perfuses" or saturates the lower lungs more thoroughly. The lower lung tissue is thus more compressed than the upper lungs. As a result, the air we inhale moves naturally into the open alveoli of the upper lungs. Unless we take a good, deep breath, we do not raise the ration of air to blood in the lower lungs. When we invert, blood perfuses the well-ventilated upper lobes of the lungs, thus ensuring more efficient oxygen-to-blood exchange and healthier lung tissue.

Inverting also gives the heart a break. The heart works persistently to ensure that freshly oxygenated blood makes its way up to the brain and its sensory organs. When inverting, the pressure differential across the body is reversed, and blood floods to the brain with little work from the heart.

The lymphatic system is responsible for waste removal, fluid balance, and immune system response. Lymph vessels arise among the capillary beds of the circulatory system, but comprise a separate system that transports stray proteins, waste materials, and extra fluids, filtering the fluid back through the lymph nodes and dumping what remains into the circulatory system at the subclavian veins, under the collarbones. The lymphatic system is analogous to a sewage system, an intricate, underground network tied to every house in town which keeps the citizens healthy.

Lymph, like the blood returning to your heart via the veins, is dependent upon muscular movement and gravity to facilitate its return. Because the lymphatic system is a closed

pressure system and has one-way valves that keep lymph moving towards the heart, when one turns upside down, the entire lymphatic system is stimulated, thus strengthening your immune system. Viparita karani is a good example of this, as it is a mild inversion that one can enjoy with no stress on the body.

## **Inversions while Menstruating**

During menstruation women are advised to avoid inversions. When the body is inverted, gravity causes the vessels supplying blood to the uterus to be partially blocked, and this can temporarily stop the flow. The energy of the body at this time in a woman's cycle is moving down into the earth. Going upside down during the menses disturbs this natural rhythm and can result in a feeling of shakiness, disorientation, or nausea. During your moon cycle, it is important to honor your body by going with, rather than against, this natural flow.

## **Headstand and Shoulder Stand**

Headstand and shoulder stand are referred to as the king and queen of all yoga asanas. Headstand is referred to as the king of all poses, while shoulder stand is referred to as queen of all poses. Headstand develops the masculine qualities of will power, sharpness of the brain and clarity of thought, while shoulder stand develops the feminine qualities of patience and emotional stability. These two poses are opposites energetically. Headstand tends to heat the body and stimulate the nervous system and tones the neck muscles. Shoulder stand tends to cool or neutralize the body and sedate the nervous system while releasing the muscles of the neck and shoulders. In practice together, the logical sequence is to do headstand first, followed by shoulder stand either immediately after, or later in your practice session. Headstand can leave you feeling very stimulated, so once it's done you really are committed to doing the other. Shoulder stand can be safely practiced on its own as it has the amazing ability to neutralize the nervous system.

## **Shoulder Stand**

The importance of sarvangasana cannot be over-emphasized. "It is one of the greatest boons conferred on humanity by our ancient sages," Mr. Iyengar states. It is the "mother of asana," as a mother strives for harmony and happiness in the home, so this asana strives for the harmony and happiness of the human system. It is a cure-all for most common ailments.

There are several endocrine organs or ductless glands in the human system, which bathe in blood, absorb the nutrients from the blood and secrete hormones for the proper functioning of a balanced and well-developed body and brain. If the glands fail to function properly, the hormones are not produced as they should be and the body starts to deteriorate. Many asanas have a direct effect on the glands and help them function properly. Sarvangasana does this for the thyroid and parathyroid glands, which are located in the neck region, since due to the firm chinlock their blood supply is increased. This ample supply of blood increases their efficiency in maintaining the body and the brain in good balance. Further, since the body is inverted the venous blood flows to the heart by force of gravity, without any strain. Healthy blood is allowed to circulate around the neck and chest. As a result, people suffering from breathlessness, palpitation, asthma, bronchitis and throat ailments get relief. As the head remains firm in this inverted position, and the supply of the blood to it is regulated by the firm chinlock, the nerves are soothed and headaches disappear.

Continued practice of this asana eradicates common colds and other nasal disturbances. Due to the soothing effect of the pose on the nerves, those suffering from irritation, shortness of temper, nervous breakdown and insomnia are relieved. The change in gravitational pull on the body also affects the abdominal organs so that the bowels move freely and constipation is relieved. The asana is recommended for urinary disorders and uterine displacement, menstrual trouble, and hernia. It also helps to relieve epilepsy, low vitality and anemia. It activates the abdominal organs and relieves people suffering from stomach and intestinal ulcers and severe pain in the abdomen.

Shoulder stand strengthens the upper body, legs and abdomen, opens the chest, and stretches the neck, shoulders and upper back muscles. Helps to relieve varicose veins and drains used blood from the legs, pelvis and abdominal area. It is very soothing to the nervous system and therefore good to practice when one is tense, upset, nervous, irritated, fatigued, or when suffering from insomnia.

It is no over-statement to say that if a person regularly practices sarvangasana they will feel new vigor and strength, and will be happy, confident and at peace. New life will flow into them; their mind will be at peace and will feel the joy of life.

People suffering from high blood pressure, detached retina, glaucoma, hernias, cardiovascular disease, cervical spondylitis, slipped discs should not practice shoulder stand. Those suffering from neck injuries should seek advice from an experienced yoga teacher before beginning to practice shoulder stand. It is advisable for women during menstruation to avoid inversions.

## **Headstand**

Sirsasana is one of the most important asanas in yoga. It revitalizes the entire body and stimulates the mind.

Headstand ensures a proper blood supply and stimulates the pituitary and pineal glands in the brain, glands that are responsible for growth and sex hormones. Our growth, health and vitality depend on the proper functioning of these two glands that control the chemical balance of the body.

Regular practice of sirasana makes healthy pure blood flow through the brain cells. This rejuvenates them so that thinking power increases and thoughts become clearer. Headstand stimulates the nervous system, increasing mental alertness and clarity. It is a centering, calming and soothing pose. People suffering from loss of sleep, memory and vitality have recovered by the regular practice of this asana.

Headstand strengthens the spine, neck, shoulders and arms. The muscular system of the abdomen and legs are toned. Blood and lymph fluid is relieved from the legs and ankles and with regular practice prevents the buildup of fluid in the legs and feet. Coupled with shoulder stand it is a benefit to people suffering from constipation. The lung tissue is stimulated, which relieves colds, coughs, tonsillitis, bad breath and palpitations.

By reversing the pull of gravity on the organs, especially the intestines, it helps to cleanse them and overcome problems of the liver, kidneys, stomach, intestines and reproductive system. Headstand increases gastric fire and produces heat in the body. When done properly, headstand helps the spine become properly aligned, improving posture, facilitating good

breathing and reducing muscular stress. The weight of the abdominal organs on the diaphragm encourages deep breathing, which gently massages the internal organs. Sirsasana is used to treat asthma, hay fever, diabetes, headaches, anxiety and menopausal imbalance.

Headstand provides an opportunity for experimenting safely with the unfamiliar and the fear it creates. Headstand can be scary; it literally turns your world upside down.

People suffering from high blood pressure, detached retina, glaucoma, hernias, cardiovascular disease, cervical spondylitis, thrombosis, arteriosclerosis, and kidney problems should not practice headstand. Those suffering from neck injuries should seek advice from an experienced yoga teacher before beginning to practice headstand. It is advisable for women during menstruation to avoid inversions.

Time spent upside down everyday, especially in sarvangasana and sirsasana, is one of the best things you could possibly do for yourself. These poses bring health and vitality to the body while calming and soothing the mind and spirit.