

SIX

inverted postures

HEADSTAND

Headstand is said to be the king of the yoga asanas. The muscular, nervous, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, digestive, eliminative, and reproductive systems all benefit from the practice of the headstand. It is not an overstatement to say that if you stand on your head for a few minutes each day, your whole outlook on life can be improved.

Since the heart is below the brain, the arterial blood that supplies oxygen and cell-building material to the brain tissues must be constantly pumped upward against the force of gravity. One of the greatest benefits of headstand is that it reverses the effect of gravity and brings arterial blood directly to the brain cells, thus rejuvenating one's thinking power.

Hormonal secretion of the endocrine glands becomes more efficient through headstand practice. Situated in the center of the skull is the pituitary gland. This gland, along with the hypothalamus, which is also centered in the skull, helps to control the secretion of hormones by most of the other endocrine glands through a negative-feed-

back system. The thyroid, parathyroid, adrenal, pancreas, and sex glands are all under the control of the pituitary-hypothalamus connection. When you consider that all the body processes are influenced by the chemical secretions of the endocrine system and that the key gland of that system, the pituitary, must have a proper supply of blood to work efficiently, it is no wonder that headstand is the king of the yoga asanas from the standpoint of body chemistry alone.

The person who has digestive and eliminative problems will benefit greatly through headstand practice. Headstand reverses the pull of gravity on the organs of the digestive tract, thus decreasing the tension surrounding them. After the basic headstand posture becomes comfortable, numerous twisting variations can be added that will relieve tension from the abdominal region even more. The headstand and its variations will help a person to overcome problems of constipation, overacidity, hemorrhoids, and disorders of the bladder, kidney, liver, and intestines.

The reproductive system is also aided by doing headstand. Sexual potency can be

increased and sexual energy can be rechanneled for physical, mental, and spiritual development. *Headstand helps to regulate the menstrual cycle if done on a daily basis; however, it should be avoided while menstrual flow is heaviest because it could cause a stoppage of the period if held for a long while.*

When we are in an upright position, the venous blood returning to the heart from the abdominal region, pelvic region, and legs must constantly travel upward against gravity. Let us focus specifically on the blood circulation in the legs. Essentially, we have to depend upon the leg muscles that surround the veins to push the blood back to the heart against gravity. Vigorous exercise will greatly increase the venous return of blood, and yet headstand and other inverted postures will do so less stressfully and more directly.

Increased muscular strength is developed in the upper arms, shoulders, upper back, abdominal muscles, buttocks, and thigh muscles through the performance of headstand. Headstand also strengthens the muscles along the spinal cord. This increased muscular strength helps one to maintain better body alignment while sitting and standing. All the main systems of the body function more effectively when the body is held in good alignment.

People who have a dull and forgetful mind can improve the clarity of their thoughts through headstand practice. Possibly even more important is that headstand can help you adopt a more positive outlook toward life. Confronted constantly by life's many demands and duties, you need to find a reliable means of renewal. During headstand, you can become detached from daily problems and get the equivalent of a battery recharge. You can come out of the posture with an elevated psyche and clearer mind. This allows you to function more efficiently and effectively while out and about in the world.

Mechanics of Headstand

How long should you hold headstand? The answer depends on the individual. In the beginning, 20 to 30 seconds is usually a long time. Slowly and carefully you can increase the amount of time the posture is held. After a few years of practice you can work up to holding headstand for 10 to 15 minutes. The longer you maintain the correct pose, the more beneficial, potentially, will be the results.

Headstand must be performed correctly, however, or major problems in the neck and lumbar spine ensue. Many muscles must work to keep the pressure off the neck and to keep the spine and the legs in a completely vertical position. Headstand is not a posture for the novice beginner and must be learned under the guidance of a qualified teacher of yoga. It is not recommended for those with high blood pressure or those with serious eye or ear problems.

The weight of the body should eventually be carried evenly by the elbows, forearms and the head during the performance of headstand. To keep the neck from compressing, the upper arm, shoulder, back, abdominal, buttocks, and leg muscles must all work quite strongly. Basically, the idea is to push the forearms down against the floor while lifting straight up through the rest of the body.

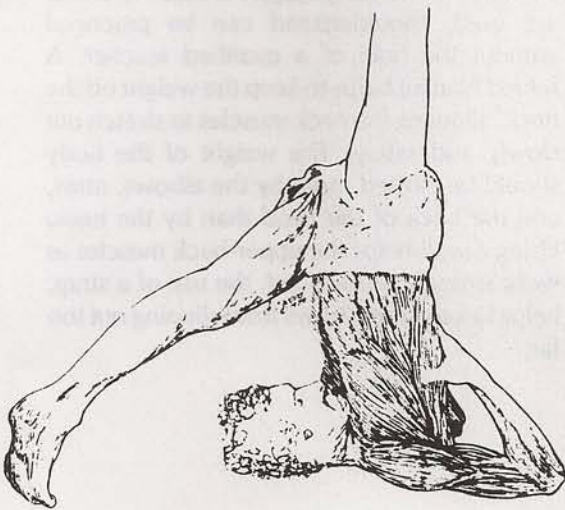
Arching of the lumbar vertebrae must be avoided in order to keep the lower spine from compressing. Length has to be maintained in the lower spine because swayback can cause a serious backache. Straightening of the lower back and of the pelvis occurs mainly through a combined effort of the abdominal and buttocks muscles. To aid the work of the abdominal muscles and the alignment of the spinal cord, the quadriceps muscles (frontside thigh muscles) need to work also. Rather than letting the legs be lax in headstand, the correct procedure is to keep them alive and stretching upward.

series twice. Keep the breath deep and steady throughout. The weight must be maintained equally on both forearms, and both shoulders must lift throughout the routine. Keep the pelvis tucked and the legs stretching as you move from posture to posture. Study each picture carefully before attempting it. Make sure to have someone watch you and give you corrections until you are certain that you can do it properly without help.

SHOULDERSTAND

Shoulderstand is known as the queen of the yoga asanas. B.K.S. Iyengar recommends that shoulderstand be performed as a followup to headstand, since it provides a perfect counterbalance to headstand. The thyroid and parathyroid glands are directly stimulated in shoulderstand, owing to the inverted position of the body and the neck and head position. You'll recall that it was primarily the pituitary gland that was stimulated by headstand. The mind calms down more in shoulderstand, owing to the head, neck, and body position. The two work together as a unit and should be

FIGURE 6.14



practiced together—shoulderstand after headstand.

Although it is important to work the body hard in both poses, a very different attitude is required in approaching each one. You must give into the stretch of the neck muscles and neck vertebrae while practicing shoulderstand and adopt more of a yielding, receptive attitude, whereas in headstand, pushing down hard with the forearms and lifting through the shoulders and the rest of the body becomes the main concern. This is not to say that the whole body should be passive while you are performing shoulderstand. On the contrary, the elbows should be drawn inward, the upper-back muscles should be drawn in toward the spine and lifted very strongly,

and the legs stretched upward. Shoulderstand is a difficult posture to maintain because the body must work hard to maintain a good pose, and yet the activity of the mind begins to decrease the longer the posture is held. Your will power is put to test by these two opposing forces.

Shoulderstand can be held for up to ten minutes by the very advanced practitioner, but it is more difficult to hold for this lengthy period than headstand, mainly for the reasons just cited. As a general rule, it is good practice to hold shoulderstand for at least half as long as headstand. It is said that holding headstand without the counterbalancing effect of holding shoulderstand can cause irritability.

A most obvious benefit of shoulderstand is that it stretches and breaks up tension in the muscles that run along the back of the neck. Shortness at the back of the neck causes too much cervical curve and can be the cause of headaches, neckaches, upper-back pain, slipping of vertebrae out of place, and pain or lack of feeling in the arms and hands. As the muscles at the back of the neck stretch, the cervical curve lengthens, and the nerves that emanate from between the neck vertebrae, as well as the nerves that run down the neck, are

able to function more freely. Shoulderstand also stretches out the muscles on both sides of the neck equally, and this allows the vertebrae to move back into good alignment.

An extremely important benefit of shoulderstand is that the thyroid and parathyroid glands are stimulated to function more efficiently. The thyroid gland controls the body's metabolic rate. The two main hormones secreted by the thyroid gland govern the overall rate at which oxygen is used by the body. Efficient metabolism of carbohydrates and proteins depends directly on the condition of the thyroid gland, as do the normal growth and development of the body, especially the brain.

The parathyroid glands lie close to the thyroid gland and control the metabolism of calcium and phosphate in the body. Normal skeletal and cardiac muscular activity, as well as blood clotting, depend on normal calcium levels in the plasma. Stiffness, cramps, and muscle spasms can result from lack of calcium. Overactivity of the parathyroid glands could result in serious kidney, bone, or muscular problems.

Daily practice of the shoulderstand will stimulate an underactive thyroid or parathyroid gland or both in such a way as to increase hormonal activity. On the other hand, if there is overactivity in either or both of these glands, shoulderstand practice will help to slow down their hormonal secretion. A balanced level of hormonal secretion by the pituitary gland will be attained through shoulderstand and headstand practice in the same regulatory way. The adrenal glands, pancreas, and sex glands will balance their production of hormones through a well-rounded set of standing postures, twists, backbends, forward stretches, and inverted postures.

To be calm and yet full of energy is the goal of yoga practice. Shoulderstand is a posture that helps bring about this desired balance. Some of the other tangible benefits of shoulderstand include a decrease of head-

aches, nervousness, hypertension, insomnia, and ulcers as well as an improvement of memory and mental alertness, better assimilation of food, better elimination of indigestible foodstuff, and an increase in sexual vitality along with better control over the sexual energy.

Another key benefit of the shoulderstand is that it greatly aids the venous return of blood from the legs, pelvic region, and abdominal region to the heart by the force of gravity. If the carbon-dioxide-laden blood in the veins gets bogged down in the legs, serious problems can ensue. The same also applies to the organs of reproduction, elimination, and digestion. Menstrual disorders can be helped through the daily practice of shoulderstand, which, however, should not be done during the heaviest days of menstruation.

Mechanics of Shoulderstand for Beginning Students

Shoulderstand must be approached with great caution in order to avoid damage to the neck. A thickly folded blanket or mat, as well as the wall, should be used while practicing shoulderstand in the early stages. If these two aids are used, shoulderstand can be practiced without the help of a qualified teacher. A folded blanket helps to keep the weight off the neck, allowing the neck muscles to stretch out slowly and safely. The weight of the body should be carried more by the elbows, arms, and the back of the head than by the neck. Using a wall helps the upper-back muscles to work strongly. A third aid, the use of a strap, helps to keep the elbows from slipping out too far.