

SIRASANA

A STAGED APPROACH TO EXPLORING HEADSTAND

Richard Adamo of BWY Accredited Training Organisation, Adamo School of Yoga, is well known for the strength of his asana teaching. Richard shares his approach to a yoga posture that teaches much about ourselves and our ego as we approach its challenges.

Background to the posture

Headstand, or Sirsasana is one of the key yoga poses. It is mentioned in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (HYP), so we know it has been a part of yoga for at least 600 years. It is not a modern invention copied from Swedish gymnasts!

In the HYP* it is included as one of the 10 mudras that control the flow of prana, the life force, and are ancillary to accessing Kundalini energy, a reserve of energy contained in the body. The inversion of the body is part of the Hatha physiology where the reversal of energy flow and the Sun and Moon centres allows for the stimulation of the digestive fire which heats the body. This is an anti-ageing practice. It is one of the many ways described in the Hatha texts and traditions to raise heat in the body, cleanse the nadis and awaken the energy of Kundalini.

Let's remember the dates of the texts that we use and put them in the context of medieval knowledge about physiology and even anatomy. Having said that, many of the observations about the effects of practice seem to hold up over the ages.

Modern interpretation

I'll try and bring things up to date and explain them in terms that makes sense to us. From the viewpoint of the Hatha system, illness comes from three sources - genetic, accidents and lifestyle. The only one that we can alter is our lifestyle. Maybe a balanced lifestyle can lower our risk of accidents and even the expression of genetic predispositions. Our lifestyle is improved by a beneficial routine,

a moderate diet, appropriate exercise, breathing exercises and our mental and emotional balance. These benefit us by having a lean and healthy body, a strong digestion with clear vessels (nadis) and resistance to disease. Our outlook on life should be cheerful, resilient and determined. In this era, once you became ill it was too late as most treatments were ineffective.

Stimulating the digestive system through practices that increase the heat of the body was the key, and as we know now exercise that raises our metabolic rate is good for our health. The idea that our bodies contain tubes that have to be kept clear through exercise that heats the body up and increases the flow of oxygen, blood and lymph is something that fits in with our modern understanding of good health.

In the HYP, Headstand is not described with the other asanas but with the mudras. The background to practice is different to our approach today. Rather than being sparing with our diet we are encouraged to eat more or 'the body will consume itself;' (HYP 3-81). We now know the importance of eating protein after exercise so that we maintain and increase our muscle bulk, which will not happen on a restricted diet where muscle wastage can occur.

Practice Makes Perfect

Having looked at the background, let's get to the posture! Headstand should be a stable inverted pose where the body feels able to maintain the posture.



1



2



3



4

This will only happen once we have developed sufficient strength and balance, something that takes time. So, if we want a stable pose my advice is to forget about 'achieving' headstand and focus on developing the strength to do the pose with control. This will minimise the risk of injury that can happen in an unprepared system. We need strength in our neck, shoulders and core, not to mention all the other areas involved in stabilising the body! None of this is a quick fix and we require a patient and consistent approach. Once you can balance comfortably, then frequent practice will cement the preparatory work. We also develop our sense of proprioception when we are inverted.

Preparation

A folded mat or blanket is often advised for comfort and safety. All poses that develop upper body strength are useful preparation, especially down dog and arm balancing postures such as plank and elbow plank. Poses that round the back and close the abdomen are helpful. Often flexible people are at a disadvantage when you come to the inverted poses, as some stiffness and strength can help maintain postural alignment. You only have to see children in headstand to notice how they wobble around and struggle to balance! So, here are some preparatory exercises.

Drawing the legs into the body. This can start off with one of the best abdominal exercises - reverse curls (see photo 1)

Then move into doing the exercise in the headstand position. Bring the elbows in closely. (photos 2 and 3)

This works on rounding the back. This is connected to the first exercise with the addition of using the pressure of the forearms to open the armpits and take weight off the legs. Drawing straight legs into the trunk is great for teaching us to co-ordinate muscles as well as preparation for the more advanced straight leg entry. (photo 4)

Raising the legs in conjunction with moving the hips. OK, so we are now in effect doing a headstand. We are balancing on our head and just need to have the legs in a different position! I find it helpful to lead with lifting the heels towards the ceiling which

PRACTICE

lessens the tendency to go into a backbend.

Maintaining the Pose

Having worked on the strength needed to safely enter and exit the pose we now need to think about how we stay there. It is a general rule that the better we get at a pose the easier it becomes, and this can apply to headstand too. It is once we learn to reduce the strength element that got us into the pose and increase our sense of balance that this will happen. For balance we need to be on the top/back of our head rather than the front to have the neck in line and reduce the effort on our upper body. For the supported headstand, which is the version I am discussing, the elbows can be brought in as closely as is comfortable to provide more support for the neck and encourage us to balance rather than strain. The wider the elbows the more stress goes into the neck.

A passive contraction of the core, the waist and the hip flexors keeps the trunk stable. Squeezing the abdominal muscles tightly has little benefit as the legs are supported by the hip flexors. Keep the forearms pressing into the floor with the transfer of effort between the hands and the elbows, allowing you to adjust the weight forwards or backwards.

photos 5 and 6

Getting the alignment correct so that the belly relaxes inwards rather than outwards is a good indicator of the position of the pelvis. The breathing should be in the ribs and the abdomen kept still. This is the ideal combination of breath and bandha that helps turn asana into mudra and so work on the energy systems of the body as described in the Hatha texts. This method of asana practice has a much wider application, but headstand is a fine example of how it works.

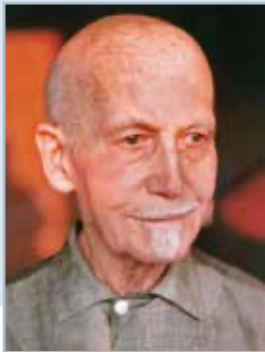
Safety

There are many benefits to Sirsasana, but a few issues need to be taken into account. Weak necks risk injury though mostly through strained muscle. Alignment of the neck is important - another reason to be more on the back of your head! - as you won't want your body weight to go down through a bent neck.

The skull is a closed space, so pressure cannot increase unevenly, though blood flow to the face may vary. There are also controls within



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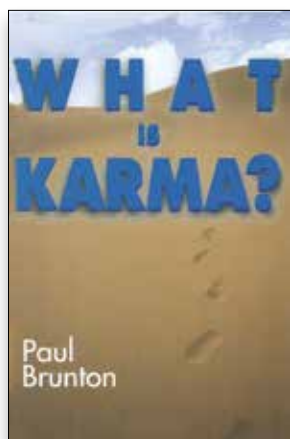
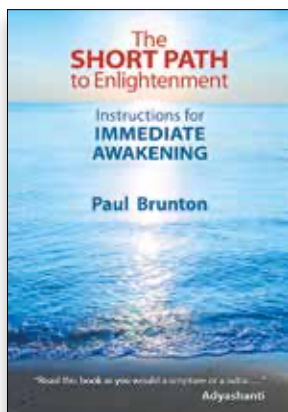
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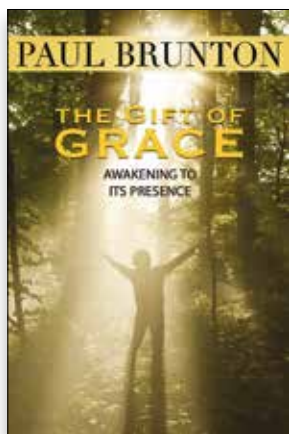
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the brain circulatory system to ensure we don't go around bursting blood vessels. As for the risk of stroke, 80% of these are caused by clots rather than haemorrhages, so an increase in brain blood flow is probably beneficial. The increased facial pressure may be good for some forms of glaucoma as it may help clear the retinal net which can become congested. My main worry would be people with osteoporosis, but if they are already proficient at headstand this may not be so much of an issue.

Patience

My advice is to start the process of training, be patient and practice little and often. We are talking about training small muscles which are easy to pull and hard to build, so rushing is not helpful. One of the things you notice about teaching headstand to people is the joy they get when they balance for the first time. This is really as important a benefit as with any physical development. The increase in self-belief and confidence based on real events is indeed one of the main fruits of yoga practice!

For a video which goes over many of these techniques please see:

W: adamoyoga.co.uk/teacher-training

Richard's next YTT is set to start in January 2023. Visit his website for more details and to register your interest.

References

Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Swami Muktibodhananda, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar. Third Edition.

Books available at Watkins Books and throughout the UK

For more information on Paul Brunton and his writings visit www.PaulBrunton.org



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