

The *healing* power of supported and passive inverted postures and backbends.

BY FLO FENTON

There are at least three good reasons why we may consider using props to perform passive and supported variations of the inversions and backbends. The first is that they provide a 'way in' to the final pose, allowing stiff or less strong practitioners to gradually build the flexibility and strength required, at the same time giving access to many of the benefits of the final pose.

The second is that, even for advanced practitioners accustomed to a strong and flexible body, there are times when we may need to rest, and work on building the internal effects of these postures to increase the body's immunity and vitality. Such times may be: recuperating from illness, at the start of feeling unwell, after or during an emotional trauma, or just before menstruation. In these situations, the passive inversions and backbends come into their own. Without requiring much effort, the body is supported in a recuperative position, which also assists the body to prepare for the more active or 'full' version of the pose. The third is when there is a particular muscular/skeletal imbalance that requires work. For example, if in our backbends we tend to create compression and resulting pain in the lower back, we can experiment with doing our backbend over a chair, to create greater opening in the upper back and chest.

THE INVERSIONS

The inverted poses (or inversions) hold a special place among the yoga *asanas*. Each of the groups into which the *asanas* broadly fall (standing postures, forwards bends, twists, backbends, balances and inversions) pose a particular challenge for the body, and also invoke a particular response from the body. As well each of these groups of yoga *asanas* creates a particular stimulus for the internal organs, including the endocrine glands of the body, producing specific bio-chemical changes. These changes can in turn alter our overall health and wellbeing, as well as producing subtle changes to our state of mind. Thus in general terms, the standing poses create strength and stability, the forwards bends the ability to look within, the twists promote efficient digestion and spinal mobility, the balances improve focus, and the backbends increase energy, courage, and the ability to connect with others.

For many practitioners, the 'magic' of yoga really begins with the inverted poses. The inversions create the unique situation of completely reversing the usual effect of gravity on our bodies. In the muscular-skeletal system, the feet and legs no longer have to bear the entire weight of the body. The bones, muscles and joints of the hips and legs thus get a break from their normal work, bringing relief from

rheumatic or arthritic complaints. In the digestive system, reversing the effect of gravity on the small and large intestines helps to clear out any blockages, and provides a general stimulus to intestinal motility. This in turn produces the effect of increasing the body's ability to remove toxins, leading to a greater overall level of health and energy. In the circulatory system, blood flows more easily to the head, which ensures a plentiful supply of oxygen and nutrient rich blood to the brain and to the glands in the brain and throat which act as control centres for the whole body. Thus the inversions have the effect of eradicating many conditions due to hormonal imbalance. (I strongly recommend an inversions based practice in the week leading up to menstruation, particularly for those who suffer from emotional 'swings' or menstrual problems.) Blood flow is also increased to the chest and neck, improving respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchial disorders. Finally, the sense of quiet induced by these postures slows down metabolism, provides a natural rest for the heart and lungs, and soothes the nervous system. It is said that regular practice of the inversions improves mental clarity and peace of mind.

However, for many practitioners of yoga, the inversions present too great a challenge, and require too much physical effort to be of

much benefit. Doing a shoulderstand before we are flexible enough in the neck, or a headstand before we are strong enough in the neck and shoulders and aware enough of the correct alignment of the neck, can be extremely counter productive for the body and our overall sense of wellbeing. The careful use of props such as blankets, bolsters, a belt, the wall, chairs (or even your bed), can make these poses enormously more accessible and much more beneficial.

Personally, I believe that my yoga chair, bolster and blankets (under \$100.00) are probably the best investment in my health and happiness that I have made!

THE POSES, BENEFITS, AND MODIFICATIONS

SARVANGASANA/SHOULDERSTAND

Special benefits of the pose:

Due to the position of the chin pressing on the throat, the special benefits of this pose include the stimulation of the thyroid and parathyroid glands. Thyroid hormones are in charge of the regulation of metabolism of the entire system, as well as regulating growth, development and the balanced activity of the nervous system. Parathyroid hormones regulate the balance of calcium and phosphates in the blood stream and their absorption into bone. This pose is particularly calming, and has the effect of boosting vitality and calming the mind.

Contraindications:

If your neck feels sore or strained, or if the pose brings too much blood to the face creating pressure please do the pose with blankets and a belt. The pose is not recommended for those with high blood pressure unless you are comfortable in *Halasana* (plough pose) for at least three minutes. It is recommended that you should always begin in *Halasana* (plough pose) before going into *Sarvangasana* (shoulderstand). Those with low blood pressure should not begin a practice session with inversions. Finally, no shoulderstand during menstruation.

Stage 1. Supported shoulderstand in a chair. (Photo 1)

This passive variation of *Sarvangasana* (shoulderstand) retains many of the benefits of the full pose, whilst requiring very little

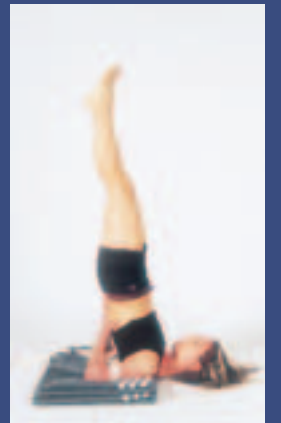
*Instructions on using the blankets for shoulderstand and plough pose variations.

For all of the following shoulderstand and plough pose variations, it is suggested to use a stack of blankets and often a belt. The blankets will raise the shoulders off the floor and reduce the angle of the neck. The belt is to prevent the elbows from slipping outwards on the blanket and to help keep them shoulder width apart. This in turn will reduce pressure on the neck and provide greater 'lift' in the pose. For all of this to work however, the blankets must be folded and positioned correctly, and the shoulders correctly positioned on the blankets.

Use from one and up to four blankets, using more blankets the less flexible you are in the neck. The blankets must be folded neatly and should form a rectangle that is made up of four layers of the blanket fabric. The neatest folded edges of all the blankets are stacked carefully together. Then the tops of the shoulders are placed so that they are about level with the folded edges, ie the shoulders are on the blankets, but the neck is off.

For those postures that require a belt, place a belt beside you where you can reach it easily, with the loop of the belt already

adjusted so that it will hold your elbows shoulder width apart. The belt will be taken over one elbow and then the other, behind the back, and the hands placed either side of the spine with the fingertips pointing up towards the buttocks.



physical effort. The whole body is supported in an inverted position, making it very calming and relaxing. The chin is tilted in towards the neck to a lesser degree making it accessible to, and at the same time therapeutic for, those with neck stiffness. If your neck feels sore in the pose, use a bigger stack of blankets under the shoulders to further decrease the angle of the neck. If at first you feel too much pressure in the face, come down after a short period. Gradually, you will become accustomed to being upside down, and the pose will become truly comfortable.

Place a stack of blankets on the floor in front of a chair. (See *instructions above). Place a bolster on the edge of the stack nearest the chair. Place another blanket on the chair seat and one on the chair back. Sit astride the chair facing the chair back. Holding onto the chair back, carefully take one leg and then the other up onto the chair back. Lean back. Then take your hands one at a time onto the seat of the



Photo 1

chair and move your buttocks closer to the front edge of the seat. Start to lie back, curving your waist over the edge of the chair seat. Carefully lower yourself downwards so that your shoulders are resting on the bolster, with your head on the blankets. Your hips should catch on the edge of the seat and prevent you from sliding all the way off, but if they don't, keep hold of the chair legs at first.



Photo 2

Stage 2. Shoulderstand using the wall. (Photo 2)

This variation allows you to start to build the strength required in the pose, while the wall provides some support for the weight of the legs. It also enables you to gradually get used to the strong stretch on the back of the neck. The further away from the wall you place the blankets, the less will be the angle for the head and neck.

Use three or four blankets, neatly folded and with the folded edges matched together. Have the neatly folded edges facing away from the wall. Lie down with the shoulders on the blankets but the neck and head off the edge. (See *instructions page). Have the belt ready in a loop that will hold your elbows shoulder width apart. Put your feet on to the wall at hip height and lift your hips up to bring your spine into an upright position. Now take the belt over first one elbow and then the other, behind your back. Use your hands either side of your spine to support your back, fingers pointing up. Take the feet, ankles and knees together and work the pubic bone forwards, rather than letting it disappear between the thighs. Stay here for 10-25 breaths if comfortable. Then extend the legs with the heels resting on the wall, like a plank, for 10 breaths. You can then either come down, or go into shoulderstand by bending the knees and then lifting the legs one at a time away from the wall. No 'banana stands'! Keep your pubic bone pushing forwards, in the direction of your face. Stay in the pose for 25 breaths if comfortable. Either come down by taking the feet one at a time back to the wall, bending the knees, removing the belt, and sitting the buttocks back down on the floor (so that you end up lying down with the legs up the wall) or come into *Halasana* (plough pose).

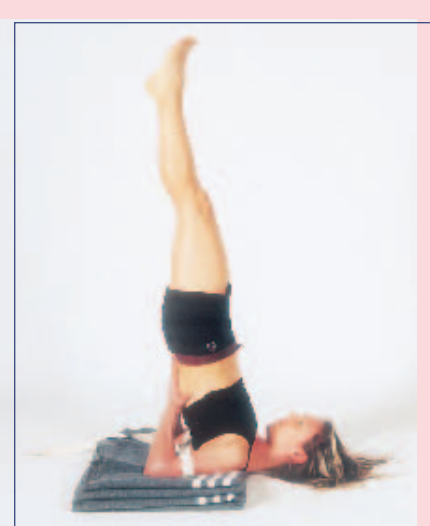


Photo 3

Stage 3. Blankets and belt. (Photo 3)

Using the blankets and the belt is just one step removed from full shoulderstand. It is a good idea to do shoulderstand this way if you have had a long break and are a bit rusty, or if you tend to do a 'banana stand' (ie. the legs lean forwards from the waist.)

Set up a stack of blankets and place the shoulders on the edge of the neatly folded stack (see *instructions page) Use more blankets the less flexible you are. Take the legs over the head into *Halasana* (plough pose) and then take one arm through the belt, then the other, so that the belt is just above the elbows. Take the palms onto the back, fingers pointing upwards. Take the legs up into shoulderstand.

HALASANA/THE PLOUGH (PHOTO 4)

Special benefits of the pose:

As well as imparting the same benefits as *Sarvangasana* (shoulderstand) because of the chin-lock (see *Sarvangasana* benefits) *Halasana* also cleanses and tones the abdominal organs and relieves wind, due to the effect of being doubled over. The entire spine is stretched and lengthened, the neck and shoulders especially benefiting from the lengthening effects of this pose.

Contraindications:

Those who have recent neck injury and/or a very stiff neck and shoulders, should not attempt to take the legs over the head and the feet to the floor straight away. Until the neck lengthens, let the feet rest on a bench or bolster, using plenty of blankets beneath the shoulders, and/or see following modifications. No *Halasana* during menstruation.

Stage 1. Halasana over a chair/bed. (Photo 5)

This passive version of *Halasana* (plough pose) is one of the best and most reliable methods of avoiding sickness that I know. Whenever you

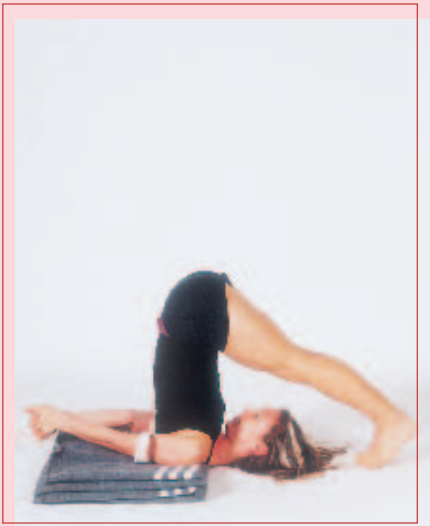


Photo 4

have the feeling that you are about to succumb to a bout of the flu, or are just feeling run down, stay in this pose for 45 minutes or so. The effect of the pose on the kidney region calms the adrenals, and the bent over position stimulates the functioning of the thymus gland behind the heart which is in charge of the immune response. The combined effect creates a boost to the immune system.

Make a stack of blankets as described (see *instructions page). Have the neatly folded edges facing towards the seat of the chair (or the edge of the bed). Lie on the blankets so that the tops of the shoulders are level with the edges of the blankets and the neck is off the edge. Take hold of the chair legs and pull the chair towards you, so that your face is under the chair seat. Take your palms to the floor beside you to help lift your legs up onto the chair seat. Walk the legs right onto the seat of the chair, as far as you can. Ideally, even the thighs will be resting on the chair. Try to get at least the knees right onto the chair seat. If you feel as if you are falling off the chair, support your back with your hands as for shoulder stand. If you are very comfortable, take the arms over the head. Let the spine round. Close the eyes and relax.

Stage 2. Halasana (plough pose) with feet to the wall. (Photos 6 & 7)

Special benefits of the pose:

This pose has all the benefits of *Halasana*, plus the added benefits of bringing extra heat into the kidney area and awareness of how to keep the lower back strong in this pose, and indeed in all of the poses. Because the legs are kept at right angles to the body, (rather than bringing the toes to the floor in full *Halasana*) there is less stretch on the neck.

Have the blankets arranged in a stack as described previously. Have the folded edges



Photo 5

pointing back towards the wall, rather than away from the wall. Leave a gap, as long as your legs, between the edges of the blankets and the wall. Lie down on the blankets with your head towards the wall, your shoulders on the edge of the stack of blankets and your neck off the edge. Lift your legs up and over your head, so that the feet rest on the wall at hip-height. Take your hands up your back as for shoulderstand. Try to feel that your shoulders are directly beneath your hips, so that your back is as straight as possible, and that your legs are absolutely parallel to the floor. Come down and reposition yourself as

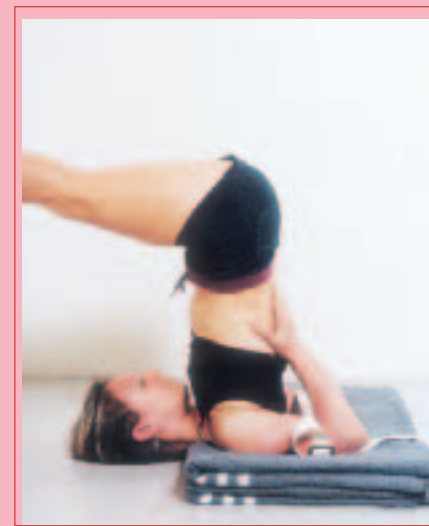


Photo 6 – correct alignment

many times as necessary! Try to point the tailbone into the centre of the room, creating strong work in the lower back. Feel with your hands that all of the bony processes of the vertebra are being taken inwards, not sticking out through the skin. After a few minutes, you will feel heat in the lower back/kidney area. Stay in the pose for another 10-20 breaths,

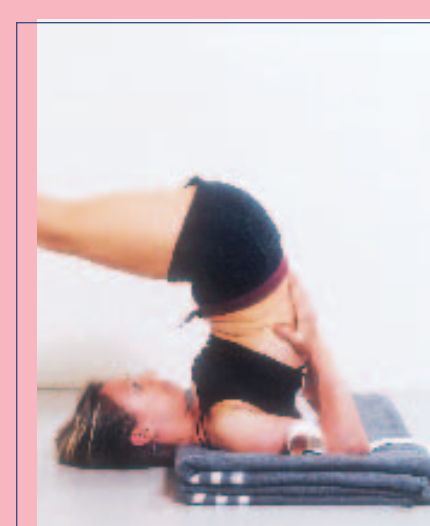


Photo 7 – incorrect alignment

and then either come up into shoulderstand, or take off the belt and roll back down on the blanket. Lie back with your knees together and your feet wide, then finish with a lying twist.

Next issue, we will look at headstand and the backbends, their benefits, and ways in which we can modify them to make them both more accessible and recuperative.

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