

The Healing Power

by Flo Fenton

of the Inverted postures and Backbends PART TWO

In issue seven, we looked at ways of modifying the shoulderstand and plough poses to make these postures more accessible to those who are not as flexible or strong as they would perhaps like to be. These passive versions of the postures can benefit even the strongest and most flexible of practitioners in times of stress, illness or recuperation.



Another reason for practicing passive variations of the inverted postures and backbends is to aid the body to open in a particular area that doesn't happen naturally when practising the active version of the posture. Using props in passive variations of backbends and inversions allows the focus to be on a particular point of restriction or weakness that is creating problems (perhaps pressure, tension, or pain from having performed the posture) in the active form of the pose. Doing the supported variation produces immediate relief while in the pose, and also retrains the body to do the active variation of the pose in a more beneficial way.

In this article we turn our focus to the benefits of *Sirsasana* (headstand) and backbends. We look at the ways to modify these postures so that they become truly beneficial, corrective and recuperative, no matter what our level of practice.

SIRSASANA-HEADSTAND

Special benefits of the pose

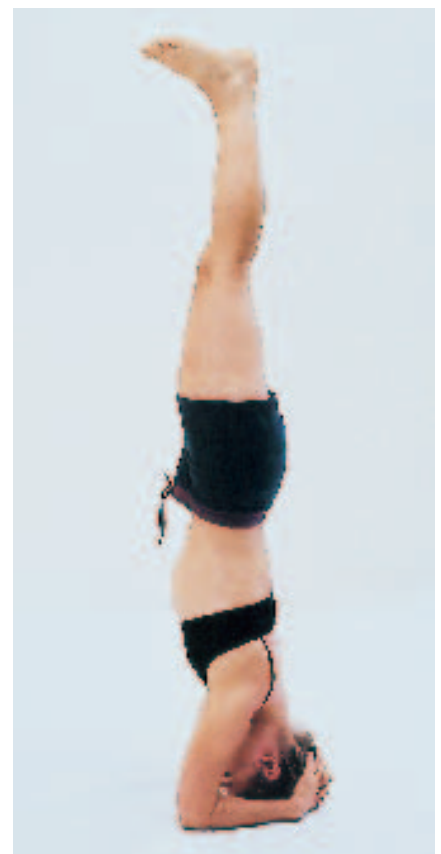
As the head is the area of the body which corresponds to the qualities of *sattva*

(equilibrium and balance), practicing this pose is said to create a calm and clear mind, improve memory and bring balance to the entire body-mind. The pressure on the crown of the head and the reversal of gravity brings more blood to the brain and the head in general. It is said to increase vitality and strengthen the heart and lungs.

Contraindications

Those who suffer from either high or low blood pressure should not begin a practice session in headstand or shoulderstand. If your neck hurts after doing headstand, talk to your teacher and/or practice the variation by the wall, as described in stage four.

The most common misalignment in headstand (and the best way to hurt your neck), is to have the head incorrectly positioned on the floor. What we want is the very top of the head on the floor. In many instances people have the part of the head between the very top and the forehead on the floor. In other words, the weight is too far forwards which causes discomfort in the back of the neck and the lower back. To feel how to correctly position the



Unsupported Headstand.



Viparita Karani.

head, imagine that you are holding a small orange between your chin and your chest, tucking your chin into your throat and lengthening the back of the neck. Doing this will ensure that you have the very top of your head on the floor. The back of your neck will be straighter and you will find that you have to shift the entire weight of the body back a little.

The second most common mistake is to let the elbows flare out too widely. They should be no wider than the shoulders – that’s closer than you think! No headstand during menstruation. Do *Viparita Karani* (legs up the wall) instead.

Alternatives and Modifications

Stage 1

Viparita Karani–legs up the wall

This pose gives the calming effects of inverting the blood flow in the legs and feet without putting any strain on the body. It is thus recommended during menstruation and when recuperating from illness. When menstruating, all of the other inversions are inaccessible as we do not want to invert the uterus. *Viparita Karani* is therefore especially welcome at this time to relieve any tiredness or pressure in the feet and legs.

Fold a blanket into a zigzag, or 'three-fold' and place it across your mat about 15 cm from the wall (more if you are very stiff in the hamstrings.) Stand beside your mat with your buttocks on or close to the wall. Bend your knees and place your hands onto the mat. Roll over to bring your back onto the floor and place your sacrum into the middle of the blanket. Have the top edge of the blanket level with the top of the pelvis so that the back of the pelvis is slightly elevated and the waist is over the edge. Straighten your legs up the wall, knees and feet



Down face dog – head on a bolster.

you may need to walk your knees forwards a bit. Have the bolster under the face and throat, parallel to the long sides of the mat. Come up onto the hands and knees, taking the feet and knees hip-width apart and lift up into down face dog. Your head should reach down onto the bolster. If it doesn't, add 1 or 2 extra folded blankets. Rest the top of the head on the bolster, not the forehead. Stay here for 10 – 20 breaths, if comfortable, and then rest in child pose.

Stage 3

Sirsasana – headstand between two chairs/benches.

This variation of headstand is ideal for people who are worried about compressing the neck vertebrae and/or feel that they do not have sufficient strength in the arms and shoulders to keep most of the weight off their head. It gives the full benefits of being completely inverted, while giving the added benefit of stretching the shoulder elevator muscles. Tightness in these muscle groups can often cause pain in the neck and shoulders after doing full headstand. This variation is corrective as well as restorative.

Position two, similar, very stable, flat seated chairs against the wall with space in between them. Place some neatly folded blankets on the chair seats. Bring your head in between the two chairs with the back of your head and neck against the wall. Pull the chairs in closer, so that your shoulders are firmly on the blankets covering the chair seats. Take your hands onto the chair seats and lift your legs up the wall, one at a time—no jumping or kicking up! (Elicit aid if you can't go up without kicking). Try to take the whole back surface of your torso, legs and heels flush to the wall. The feet work as if you are standing on them.

Let the backs of the arms rest on the chair seat. Relax here for 25 breaths or up to five minutes, if comfortable and experienced.

To come down, take the hands back onto the chair seat and lower the legs one at a time. Remember to pull the chairs apart sufficiently before taking your head out! Rest in child pose or with your head on the chair for a few minutes before coming up.

Stage 4

Sirsasana – headstand, back to wall

The wall provides support, gives a guide to our alignment in the pose and takes some of the



Headstand between two chairs.

together, big toes and ankles touching. Don't let the feet flop out to the sides. Pull up on the thighs so that the kneecaps are lifted. Make sure that your kneecaps are facing forwards, not rolling in or out. Work the feet as if you were standing on them (i.e. at right angles to your shins.) Stay here for at least 25 breaths.

Stage 2

Adhomukha Svanasana – down face dog, head on a bolster.

This pose is a good way of becoming familiar with the sensation of having some weight on the top of the head, while strengthening the arms and shoulders in preparation for the final pose.

To come into the pose, position the feet and the hands as for normal down face dog. i.e. come into child pose and stretch the hands forwards. Make sure that your tailbone is reaching back between your heels. If it isn't,



ABOVE: Urdvha Dhanurasana. Full backbend. Here the legs are shown almost straight – this is not recommended until you have mastered the length required in the lower back and the opening in the chest.

FAR LEFT: A common misalignment in headstand. The weight is too far forwards toward the forehead, creating a big arch in the back of the neck and the lower back. Make sure you tuck your chin in!

LEFT: Headstand, back to wall. Try to get the back of the head onto the wall, and try to bring the lower back and the upper back and shoulders in as close to the wall as possible.

weight off the head, as we build strength and confidence in the pose. Often, in headstand, misalignment causes imbalance and strain rather than the many benefits which should rightly come from the pose. Even long term practitioners may well benefit by practicing their headstand this way, to ensure perfect alignment as this can sometimes slip and go unnoticed over time.

Place a folded blanket (not too many folds, fold only twice no thicker than 15cm) against the wall. Position the top of the head on the blanket. Interlock the hands around the back of the head with the fingers right up against the wall and the head pressing back into the palms. The elbows should be no wider than the shoulders. Come into a down face dog position with the legs. Walk your feet in towards the face as far as possible. Make sure your chin is tucked in, so that you are on the top of your head and the back of the neck is long. Gently and gracefully lift one leg at a time up the wall.

If you need to kick up, you are not ready to do headstand unassisted. Wait for your teacher or a partner to help you. Try to bring the back of the head, neck, shoulders, waist and legs all into one perpendicular line. (i.e. whole back surface of the body against the wall as far as possible)

Stay in the pose for 25 breaths and up to 10 minutes. If there is any strain in the body or the breath, come down straight away. Rest in

child pose for at least 10 breaths before coming up to sitting. Then gently stretch the neck by coming onto all fours and placing the top of the head about 15cm in front of the hands, on a blanket. Gently roll towards the back of the head.

THE BACKBENDS

Urdvha Dhanurasana – bow pose Special Benefits of the pose

The backbends, apart from their obvious ability to create greater freedom of movement and space between the vertebrae of the spine, also strengthen the heart and stretch and open the chest and lungs. The abdominal organs are also stretched, which stimulates blood-flow promoting healthy functioning. The bowels too are stretched, providing a stimulus to intestinal motility and freeing blockages.

On a mental/emotional level, stimulation of the spine creates more of a feeling of being alive and present in the body. Backbends are stimulating postures, giving energy and alleviating fatigue. Opening the heart area creates a feeling of courage, strength and the ability to connect with the world.

Contraindications

If your lower back hurts in the active version of the pose, use the modifications indicated. Women, who are menstruating, use your own discretion. If you are bleeding heavily, experiencing pain in the abdominal region or just feeling 'inward' at this time, listen to your body and leave the backbends out of your

practice for a few days. Finally, many backbends are not recommended if you have diarrhea, or are in a hyperactive/already over-stimulated state (i.e. agitated or suffering from insomnia.)

A word on backbends

Before we proceed with the backbends variations, let us look more closely at the reasons we may need to use the variations. The human spine is capable of being flexible in a multitude of directions, right along its length, much like that of a monkey. However, because a large majority of people (yogi/yoginis, gymnasts and perhaps dancers alone excluded) move their spines through a very limited range of movement, the natural flexibility in most of the spine's length is lost. Flexibility in most of us is required, and therefore retained, only in the places where it is easiest to bend, i.e. the lumbar spine and the neck. This causes a number of problems in daily life e.g. soreness and tiredness, when the lower back is used as a hinge point for every bending movement. We come to yoga perhaps, to remedy the problem – and what happens? We continue to use the lower back as a hinge point in *Setubandha Sarvangasana* (bridge pose) and *Urdvha Dhanurasana* (full backbend), and the neck as a hinge for every upward bending movement (i.e. upward facing dog pose.)

Rather than merely increasing flexibility in the parts of the spine which are flexible already, we need to stop using those "hinge-points" as much as possible and instead, start to increase the ability of the middle and upper back and chest to open. In combination with specific postures to strengthen the lower back and abdominal musculature and that of the neck, the true benefits of yoga as a remedy for back pain can start to manifest.

The benefit of using the props in passive backbends is that we can isolate the part of the back that we want to open, while keeping the lower back stabilised and neutral.

ALTERNATIVES AND MODIFICATIONS

Upper back opening

Stage 1

Backbend over a bolster

This very passive backbend is fantastic for the very stiff or injured practitioner and those recuperating from illness. The bolster can be placed anywhere along the spine to open the back in different places. Here however, we are focusing on using the bolster below the



Backbend over a bolster. Bolster is used here to open the upper back and chest.



Lower back lengthening. Block under the sacrum, not under the waist!

shoulder blades to assist in opening the upper back and chest area, which is (as previously mentioned) often the least flexible part of the back.

Place a bolster or folded blanket/s across your mat. Lie down over the bolster so that the mid-line or 'apex' of the bolster's curve is directly beneath the nipple line. Take the arms over the head if possible. If the pose is too strong in the upper back and chest, take the arms back down, and/or use a flatter bolster or blankets. If it seems to create a strong arch into the lower back, bend the legs and place the feet on the floor, bringing the knees together and the feet wide apart. Stay in the pose for no more than five minutes the first time. The passive poses may not feel strong

when you are in them, but can feel very strong when you come out of them! Work up to spending 10-15 minutes in the pose over a few months, and/or increase the thickness of the bolster by adding folded blankets.

Stage 2

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana – over a chair

This is quite a strong opening for the upper back. Again, be careful how long you stay in the pose the first few times, as the passive backbends can be stronger than they feel when you are in them!

Ideally the chair should be on a surface that allows you to easily readjust its position. Have a blanket over the chair seat. Sit in your chair the wrong way round, facing the wall. Sit your hips

and buttocks right over the edge of the back of the chair seat before you begin. Lie back over the chair seat, so that the front edge of the chair seat is positioned just beneath the lowest points of the shoulder blades, or directly beneath the nipple-line. Holding onto the chair back, use your feet to gently push the chair away from the wall until you are able to press the feet into the wall at hip height, with the legs straight. Take the arms over the head or keep holding onto the chair-back if this is too strong. Stay in the pose for between five breaths and five minutes, depending on how comfortable you are in the pose and how often you have done it before. If you are new to it start with five breaths and build up bit by bit.

To come out of the pose, bend the knees and

take the feet back onto the floor. Hold onto the chair back and come up half way, then take the hands onto the chair seat behind you and push yourself up the rest of the way. Hang forwards over the chair back for 5 - 10 breaths.

Lower back lengthening

Stage 1

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

– bridge pose, block under sacrum

This pose is a great counter pose to the more active backbends, which tend to hinge in the lower back and create compression, if done incorrectly. It provides relief for sore lower backs while retraining the back muscles to lengthen to support a healthier backbend.

Place a block on your mat and sit just in front of it, facing the wall. Lie down on your back with the feet firmly pressed into the wall (feet together) and the block under the sacrum...not the waist! Have the block under the back of the hips with the top edge of the block no higher than the top of the sacrum (the bony part!). The waist should curve over the edge of the block. Take the arms over the head and stay in the pose for a few minutes in the beginning. Similar to the backbends using the chair, this pose can also be a lot stronger on the body than it feels when you are in it, so take care not to over do it. If you have a wooden block, you will need a blanket or towel to cover it to prevent discomfort. The foam blocks are a perfect alternative as they are softer.

If this variation hurts the lower back, try bending the knees and taking the feet onto the floor. Or, if it feels as if nothing is happening, turn the block to increase its height. You will need to move yourself and the block in towards the wall again to keep the feet pressed into the wall. Eventually, you may even be able to do the pose with the block at its greatest height.

Stage 1

Urdhva Dhanurasana

– full passive backbend, over a chair

This passive backbend encourages the whole spine into an arch, whilst supporting the weight of the body.

Set up the chair in the same way as described for *Setu Bandha* over the chair. Again, sit the tailbone right over the back edge of the chair seat before gently lying back until the front edge of the chair seat is just below the shoulder blades. Curve the spine



Setubandha Sarvangasana over a chair, feet to wall.



Full backbend over a chair.



If there is any strain in the lower back, bend the knees and take the feet onto the floor. Alternatively, walk the feet back up the wall.

back over the chair seat. Continue holding onto the chair back while you gently push the feet into the wall, letting the chair slide back until the legs are straight. Try to take the heels into the join between the wall and the floor, with the feet together and the toes pointing upwards. If there is no strain, take the arms over the head and relax. If this is too strong on the upper back, keep holding onto the chair back. If there is any discomfort in the lower back in this position, simply bend the knees and take the feet onto the floor, finding a position for the feet which prevents any feeling of strain. Alternatively, try walking the feet up the wall gradually until you find a pain free position. You can also try taking the feet wider apart...but don't let them just flop outwards! Always have the outside edges of the feet parallel. It is worth coming in and out of the position a few times to get the chair and yourself into the perfect position. Again,



Coming out of the pose – lift your chin, take hold of the chair back and push yourself up using one hand on the chair seat.



Then hang forwards over the chair back.

don't remain in the pose for too long to begin with...experiment with caution at first, only increasing the length of time in the pose gradually if no strain or pain was experienced previously on coming out of the pose.

To come out of the pose, bend the knees and take the feet back onto the floor. Hold onto the chair back, come up half-way and then take the hands onto the chair seat behind you, pushing yourself up the rest of the way. Hang forwards over the chair back for 5 - 10 breaths.

Used with discernment, these passive variations of headstand and the backbends can assist you in your practice and provide a change or rest from doing these postures in their active form. If you don't feel confident that you are doing them correctly, or confident enough to perform them by yourself, please ask your teacher to help you –then enjoy them and their many benefits!

Flo Fenton is currently teaching daily classes and designing personal programs in Byron Bay, from both The Epicentre Yoga Rooms and Yoga Arts. She also conducts retreats in Byron Bay on a regular basis. www.intouchyogabyronbay.com • flo@intouchyogabyronbay.com, Telephone: (02) 6685 9910