

# salamba sirsasana

## – headstand

Salamba Sirsasana – Headstand – is easily the most recognised of yoga poses. Peter Scott's in-depth explanation will help you appreciate the subtleties and benefits of this 'king of all asanas'.

Headstand has not always been the best known inverted asana that it is now. The classical Hatha yoga texts refer to Viparita Karani (Legs up the wall pose), rather than Salamba Sirsasana as the inverted or 'topsy-turvy' pose. Svatiarama's *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*<sup>1</sup> and the *Gheranda Sambhita*<sup>2</sup> describe it as a most important mudra. The *Siva Sambhita*<sup>3</sup>, which is stronger in its directions and seems to be the originator of the famous three-hour headstand, describes it as a mudra, although we now recognise these as the instructions for headstand. Verse 69 says "to place the head on the ground and let both legs go up", while verse 70 states that the yogi "who practices this (Viparita Karani) for one yama (three hours) conquers death. He is not destroyed even at the time of the final dissolution of the universe"!

Salamba Sirsasana helps the regular yoga practitioner to transcend the dualities of life and become balanced and independent. It is a remarkable aid to move us beyond the limits of fear by encouraging the practitioner to stretch into the unknown space above. It is of the utmost importance to treat Salamba Sirsasana in the true sense of the Sanskrit word 'sthira' which means steady, firm and steadfast.<sup>4</sup> It is only with steadfast attention that one is able to develop the awareness required to take the practice beyond the physical realms (kosha) through the physiological and into the higher mental realms of understanding. BKS Iyengar clarifies this aspect in *The Tree of Yoga*: "Focusing on one point is concentration. Focusing on all points at the same time is meditation. Meditation is both centrifugal as well as centripetal."<sup>5</sup>



## [Upakrama: methods for coming into Salamba Sirsasana]



Place the forearms on the ground, shoulder-width apart and completely interlock the fingers all the way to the webs. Keep the hands firm but relaxed and definitely not hard. Stretch the fingers away from the knuckles so as to maintain a firm grip for the whole time in the asana. (above)



Place the head on the ground to create a solid, stable base before straightening the legs. Use the top of the head – in the centre from left to right and centre from front to back.

Hold the hands firm so the wrists do not collapse. Press the forearms down so the position is secure and then straighten the legs. (above)



There are two methods of coming up into Salamba Sirsasana when it is practiced in the centre of the room. When your first practice headstand, ascend with bent legs. When you are more experienced, then you can raise the legs straight up to headstand. The different methods can also be used for different practices and/or different constitutions.

### When raising with bent legs

From the position in photo 24 straighten the legs and walk the feet in towards the arms, hold the spine erect and upright as you do this. Hold the knees and ankles together. Exhale as you bend the knees and lift the

legs so the feet are raised like photo 3. Then swing the legs over so that the knees are directly up to the ceiling as in photo 4. Consolidate the position of the arms and straighten the legs up to the final pose.

### When raising with straight legs

Walk the feet in towards the head and arms, hold the spine erect and upright, and make sure to keep the knees and ankles together. In this position strongly press the forearms down, hold the upper arms firmly, retain the shoulders in a lifted position and stretch the upper back upwards towards the ceiling. Hold this for a few breaths then exhale as you raise the legs from the ground.

## [Preparatory sequences]

1. Supta Virasana (Reclining hero pose)
  2. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Down facing dog pose)
  3. Salamba Sirsasana
- AND/OR
- 1 Adho Mukha Svanasana (Down facing dog pose)
  2. Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand)
  3. Pincha Mayurasana (Peacock pose)
  4. Salamba Sirsasana

## [Contraindications and cautions]

You should not practice Sirsasana if you have:

- Neck injuries and conditions such as spondylosis, osteoporosis, scoliosis
- Reversed cervical curve etc,
- Eye conditions such as glaucoma, detached retina or other eye disease
- Headaches, facial shingles
- High blood pressure (care is required with low blood pressure)
- Menstruation

### Sirsasana and pregnancy

If you are an experienced Sirsasana practitioner, you can maintain your practice, but you **should not take up the practice of Sirsasana after you become pregnant if you haven't practiced it before.**

## [Sthiti in Salamba Sirsasana (being in the pose)]



Learn to bring the mind to the action, so that the intricacies and technicalities of the instructions become an integrated series of one action, as opposed to a list of points to tick off.

Hold the knees, ankles and toes together. Stretch upwardly from the back of the shins to the feet. To keep lightness in the legs, make sure the feet are stretched up and not flexed down. This involves a centrifugal type of action.

Activate the legs by drawing in the outer thighs while holding the quadriceps. Firmly stretch the front of the legs back and up. As you stretch the legs up, hold the front groin (inner thighs) steadily into the body.

Hold the spine erect from the neck to the tailbone, so it is vertically upright and does not loosen horizontally.

Press your elbows to the ground and feel the rebound lift along the upper arms. This is a centripetal action. Grip the shoulder blades forward to the chest and take the thoracic spine into the body so that you lift the shoulders up (not forward).

Press your forearms down. In particular, keep the point of the forearms exactly in line with the top of the head. Stretch equally from this point to the elbows and equally from this point to the hands.

## [Upasamvhara: methods for coming out of Salamba Sirsasana]



Reverse the order of going into the pose. Whether with bent legs or straight legs, ensure lift is maintained and no undue pressure is placed on neck. For straight legs, lift the anterior spine and hold the front thighs lifted as the heels descend. Lower the legs evenly to the floor. Do not let the legs drop to the floor.

Once the legs have been lowered onto the floor, rest for a few moments with the forehead on the floor to allow the blood pressure to equalise. Stretch the arms along the floor forward of the head, or place the hands palms down under the forehead.

### Ways of practising

#### 1. Heels to wall

The wall offers support and leads to an upright and steady Salamba Sirsasana.

#### 2. Back to outer corner

The back of the skull and the tailbone are aligned with the sharp edge of the corner. This decreases any slanting caused by uneven muscular gripping.

#### 3. Back to inner corner

The knuckles are placed into the corner with the wrists supported by the walls and each hip touching a wall. This teaches alignment of the hips and leads to a straight Salamba Sirsasana.

#### 4. Three-fold blanket and flat block on feet

These props can be used separately or together. The three-fold blanket teaches the upper arms to become active and supportive. The flat block promotes an even lift through the legs, on both the front and back of the legs

## [The benefits of regular practice]

Salamba Sirsasana's benefits are mostly gained by its reversal of the effects of gravity: it aids circulation and thus rests the heart. The increased blood flow to the head improves the supply of nutrients and the removal of wastes. The lymphatic system of the lower body in particular, is assisted.

Salamba Sirsasana increases the strength of the spine and one's general sense of balance. It improves breathing habits, by increasing and deepening the breath and relaxing, opening and broadening the diaphragm. Hence it is an important associate of Pranayama (breath control).

Salamba Sirsasana is also considered to assist menopausal symptoms and, in *Light on Yoga*, BKS Iyengar suggests that regular practice of Sirsasana may also improve the immune system's ability to fight off minor ailments like coughs and colds.

### Benefits beyond the pose

If you include Sirsasana in your regular practice, you'll soon find you don't have to struggle to hold your headstand. Before too long you'll notice that the quiet stability you experience during your Sirsasana carries over from the pose itself into your daily activities. As you increase your strength and balance in the asana and in life, you'll understand why Sirsasana has earned its title as 'king of all asanas'.

*Respectful gratitude to my teachers: Guruji – BKS Iyengar, Geetaji Iyengar & Prashant Iyengar.*

*Any mistakes that may be portrayed in this article are mine and should not reflect on any teachings from these great sources of yoga.*

### For further reading

1. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, Yoga Swami Svarama, commentary Hans-Ulrich Rieker, translated Elsy Becherer 1st edition 1972 Allen and Unwin. (Ch 7 vs 6-9, Ch 9 vs 77-79)
2. *The Original Yoga*, Shyam Ghosh 1st edition, 1980 Manshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi (Ch3 vs 6)
3. *The Original Yoga*, Shyam Ghosh 1st edition, 1980 Manshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi (Ch4 vs 69 -70)
4. *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, BKS Iyengar, 2002 Thorsons
5. *The Tree of Yoga*, BKS Iyengar, 1988 Shambala Publications

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