

CHAPTER NINE

THE SHOULDERSTAND

The shoulderstand is the queen of postures and the headstand is the king, the yogis say—the former nurtures the body and the latter celebrates power and consciousness. These concepts will resonate with anyone who has had a lot of experience with both postures. Together they make a team. The headstand needs balance, and the shoulderstand, with its variations and sequela, makes the best complete practice for providing that balance.

The Sanskrit name for the shoulderstand is *sarvangasana*, which means the “all-member’s pose.” Not only do all four extremities participate in creating it, the posture, at least in its fullest expression, also requires muscular effort throughout the body. This gives it an entirely different character from the headstand, which is a balancing pose. Placing your weight on a combination of the shoulders, neck, and head, as you must in the shoulderstand, requires that the full posture be supported either with your upper extremities or with a powerful internal effort.

We can learn a lot about the shoulderstand by looking at how it differs from the headstand. The most obvious point of contrast is that in the headstand the weight of the body is on the top of the head and has its primary skeletal effect on the neck. The headstand compresses its vertebrae axially; the shoulderstand stretches the neck. Put another way, the neck acts to support the headstand, and is acted upon by the shoulderstand.

Another difference is that in the headstand the entire spine from C1 to the sacrum is inverted but straight, and the posture is balanced simply by standing up. By contrast, all the variations of the shoulderstand and its associated postures include forward bending somewhere in the body: the cervical region is flexed in the shoulderstand, and the cervical region, lumbar region, and hips are flexed in the plow. This continuing theme of forward bending explains why these postures are often followed with backbending in the bridge, the fish, and the wheel.

One last way in which the shoulderstand differs from the headstand is that significant time and commitment is required to learn about the nature of the posture and do it justice. We can get most of the common physical benefits

from the headstand by practicing that posture 3–5 minutes a day, but any serious student who wishes to get acquainted with the postures in the shoulderstand series is well advised to practice them for 20–30 minutes a day for at least three months. After that a more abbreviated practice will suffice.

In this chapter we'll first summarize the anatomy that is pertinent to the most advanced expression of the shoulderstand. Next we'll discuss the entire shoulderstand series, starting with the easiest postures, and then we'll examine the plow series. We'll then cover the aspects of circulation and respiration relevant to these poses. Finally, we'll look at exercises and postures that usually follow and balance the shoulderstand and plow, and end with a brief discussion of benefits.

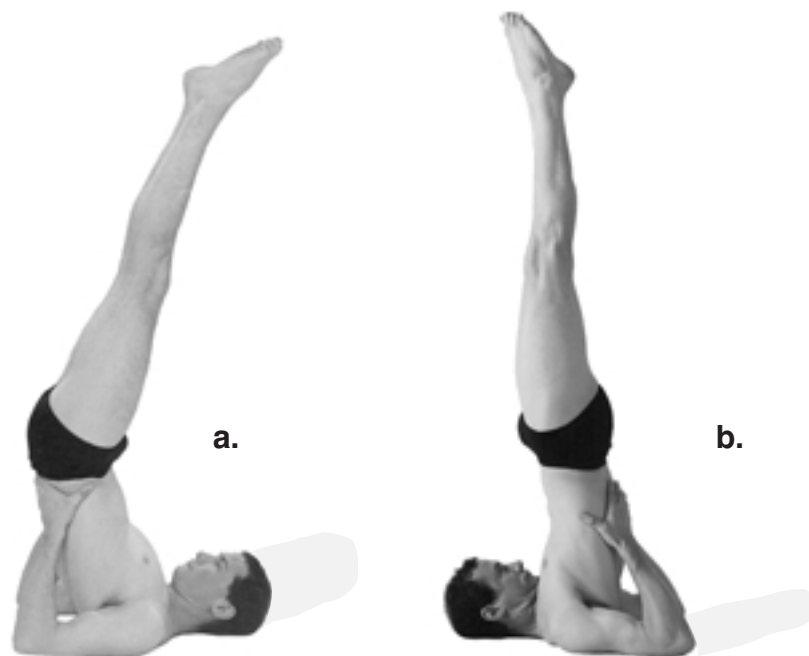


Figure 9.4. The beginning shoulderstand (a) is a straighter version of the inverted action pose, with the head still freely movable, the feet slightly overhead, little or no traction in the neck, and the hands situated comfortably to support the posture. The classic shoulderstand (b) is a more advanced posture. It is strongly supported by bracing the hands higher up on the back, and for the first time we see the sternum pressing firmly against the chin, thus creating traction in the neck. The hips should be tightly contracted, and the lower extremities held straight, so the body as a whole is not passive but aids the upper extremities in maintaining the posture.