



Arm Balances and Inversions

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I asked for strength and God gave me difficulties to make me strong. I asked for wisdom and God gave me problems to learn to solve. I asked for prosperity and God gave me a brain and brawn to work. I asked for courage and God gave me dangers to overcome. I asked for love and God gave me people to help. I asked for favours and God gave me opportunities. I received nothing I wanted. I received everything I needed. - Hazrat Inayat Khan

Introduction

It is fun being upside down! Few things make us feel like a kid again like **standing on one's head or hands**. We see the world from an entirely new perspective, we feel a rush of blood to the head, and maybe even our feet begin to tingle. There are few sports or other exercises in life that ask someone to flip themselves over like we do in yoga.

Technically, **an inversion is anytime the heart is over the head**, and almost every yoga class is full of them. Poses like **bridge, wheel, downward dog, pyramid, and forward fold are all inversions**. But when people talk about inversions, or a student requests inversions in class, they typically mean a **specific subcategory** of inversions.

The main theme of poses in this workshop is that **the bottom half of the body, including the tailbone, legs, and feet, are not on the ground**. We spend a lot of time sitting and walking on two feet, so anytime we are **on our hands, forearms, shoulders, head, or any combination thereof**, it can be a novel and challenging experience.

There are numerous **benefits** to practicing arm balances and inversions, including: **increased blood circulation, boosted immune system, greater energy, clearer mind, boosted confidence, new perspective, and improved mood**. Of course, humility is a natural byproduct of continually meeting our edges (and potentially, falling).

There are also several **contraindications** one should be aware of before attempting challenging inversions. For any pose where all of one's body weight is in the hands, any **wrist injuries or carpal tunnel syndrome** should be considered. Anybody with **cervical spine injuries** should avoid poses on the head and shoulders, like headstand and shoulderstand. When a majority of the body is in the air, both **high blood pressure** and certain eye problems like **glaucoma** can become an issue.

As with beginning any new physical activity, it is important to check in with your medical provider first about any specific concerns you may have.



Setting Our Intention

For a guide on how to approach our arm balances and inversions, we can turn to the words in **Patanjali's yoga sutras**.

Patanjali reminds us that our yoga practice is a *practice*:

1.13 *Abhyasa means having an attitude of persistent effort to attain and maintain a state of stable tranquility.*

1.14 *To become well established, this needs to be done for a long time, without a break.*

1.15 *From this stance the deeper practice continues to unfold, going ever deeper towards the direct experience of the eternal core of our being.*

From this stance we return to our practice each and every day, not looking for huge monumental improvements from yesterday, but **small incremental progress day by day for a long period of time**.

We can also remind ourselves of ***ahimsa* - the practice of nonviolence**. We can try to harm ourselves physically by ensuring we are warmed up before attempting any poses, and give ourselves useful progressions to slowly work our way up to more challenging poses. We can also not harm ourselves mentally and emotionally with self-judgement and criticism.

Of course, remember to **have fun!** Do not compare your practice with anybody else's, nor use your practice to show off. We are all on this path together.

Balancing on our Hands

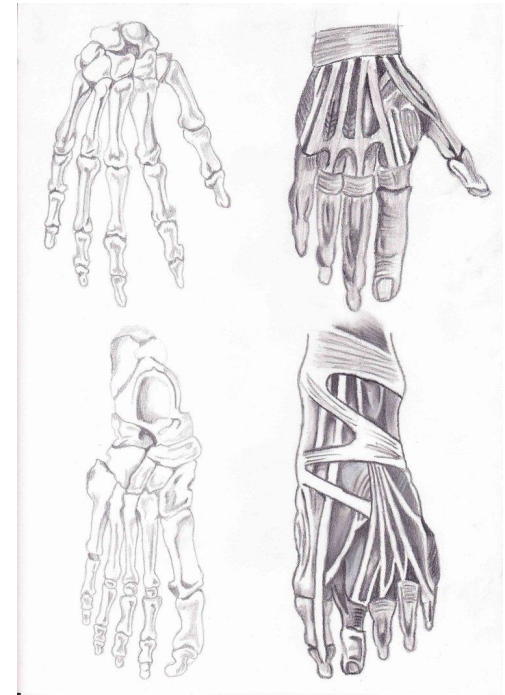
Simply put, human beings evolved to walk upright on our feet, while using our hands for things like hunting and gathering. When we begin to flip ourselves upside down onto our hands then, there are a number of anatomy considerations to remember. We can particularly focus on hands, wrists, and shoulders.

When you look at the human **hand**, you'll see that around half of the hand consists of the palm, while the other half consists of fingers. Meanwhile with the foot, roughly 80% of the foot is the flat part, while the toes account for the rest. This shows us that the feet are a good flat surface to be on. But if we want to be on our hands instead, we want to

Secondly, the **wrists** are some of the thinnest parts of the body, and significantly smaller than the ankles. In physics, Pressure is equal to force divided by unit of area. So the greater the force on less of an area, means the greater the pressure. So when all of our body weight goes through our wrists, that is a lot more pressure than they are used to. So it is important to know a number of wrist stretches and warm-ups before being on one's hands.

Lastly, the **shoulder** joint is one of the most mobile joints in the body, and relies more on muscles than on ligaments for joint stability. Thus it is important to strengthen many of the muscles around the shoulder joint, while also stretching them to remove poor holding patterns.

Lastly, a few good **counterposes** after being on one's hand include: upward tabletop, upward plank, camel, and melting heart (puppy dog) pose.






Hand balances with Bent Arms





Pose	Sanskrit	Picture	Challenges	Double points
Crow/crane pose	<i>kakasana/bakasana</i>		Wrist flexibility Upper body strength Fear Balance	One legged (eka pada bakasana)
Side Crow	<i>parsva bakasana</i>		Deep twist Coming onto one elbow	Extend legs Eka Pada Koundinyasana I
One legged arm balance	<i>eka pada koundinyasana II</i>		Adductor, hamstring and hip flexibility	Transition to chin stand (ganda bherundasana)
Eight angle pose	<i>astavakrasana</i>		Hip flexibility, low to ground	Transition from Eka Pada Koundinyasana II Elephants Trunk pose


Flying pigeon	<i>galavasana</i>		Hip flexibility Arm strength	Dragonfly (maksikanagasana)
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Hand Balances with Straight Arms

Pose	Sanskrit	Picture	Challenges	Double points
Handstand	<i>adho mukha vrksasana</i>		Balance Core Strength Upper body strength	Press up (no jumping)
Scale pose	<i>tolasana</i>		Core strength Getting to lotus	Stick pose Rooster Pose
Shoulder pressing pose	<i>bhujapidasana</i>		Adductor, hamstring and hip flexibility	Firefly (tittibasana)

Balancing in other ways

Pose	Sanskrit	Picture	Challenges	Double points
Forearm stand / Feathered peacock pose	<i>pincha mayurasana</i>		Shoulder strength Shoulder flexibility Balance Hollow Body	Scorpion (vrschikasana)
Tripod headstand	<i>sirsasana II</i>		Not falling backwards Hips over head Neck strength	Come from wide-legged forward fold
Locust	<i>salabhasana</i>		Backbend Back strength	Feet to floor or head
Peacock pose	<i>mayurasana</i>		Intra abdominal pressure Wrist flexibility	Wounded peacock (punga mayurasana)

<p>Legs up the wall pose</p>	<p><i>viparita karani</i></p>		<p>It feels so good you'll never want to leave</p>	<p>No wall (hands on lower back)</p>
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Transitions

Once you get a handle on many common arm balances, it can be an incredible treat to flow in and out of the postures.

Here are some common transitions, organized by difficulty level:

Beginner Transitions

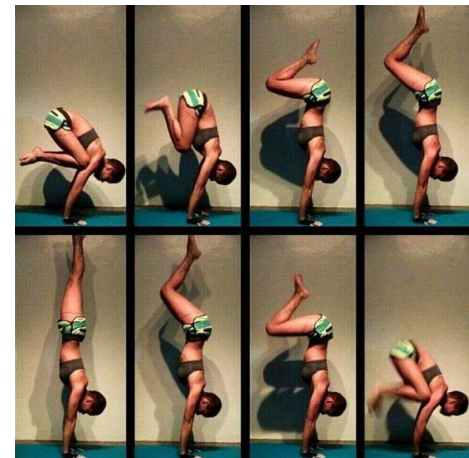
- Forward Fold → crow
- Tripod headstand ↔ crow
- Chair pose ↔ side-crow

Intermediate Transitions

- Three legged downward dog ↔ koundinyasana I/II, one legged crow
- Tripod headstand ↔ side-crow
- Crow → plank pose → downward dog → crow
- Side crow → chin stand
- Revolved lunge ↔ koundinyasana I

Advanced Transitions

- Handstand → koundinyasana I/II, firefly, wheel
- Crow/crane ↔ handstand
- Koundinyasa II ↔ eight angle



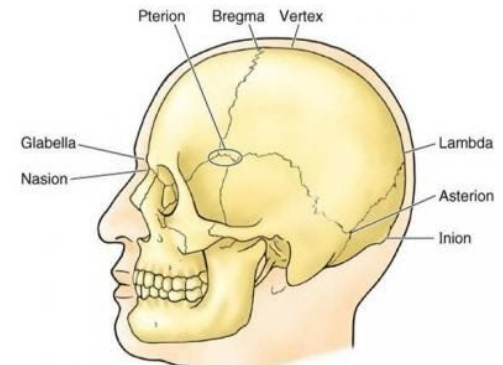
One Final note: The King and Queen of Asana

Although they have recently fallen out of favor, for many decades **headstand** and **shoulderstand** used to be known as the king and queen of asanas. They are also powerful inversions and their benefits are numerous.

Headstand

There is some contention about where to place the head on the ground for headstand. Traditionally what is known as the **bregma point** was placed on the mat. The bregma point is the point on the skull where the frontal bone and parietal bones meet. Putting this point of the mat on the head will create a slight arch in the spine.

The emphasis on the bregma has slowly transitioned to placing **the vertex of the head** on the ground. The vertex of the head is the topmost point. This will result in a straighter spine.



There are also many ways to come into headstand. For those that are more flexible, it may be easier to lift one straight leg up first, and then the other. For those with more core and arm strength, a tuck entry may be more accessible. **Child's pose** is the most common counterpose after headstand. **Rabbit pose** might also release the back of the neck.

Shoulderstand

Shoulderstand involves lifting the entire body off the and straight up into the air. For some, the 90 degree turn in the neck can be a potential source of pain or injury. In this case it can greatly help someone to have a number of folded blankets underneath the shoulders to create space between the neck and the ground.

Traditionally **fish pose** is the counterpose for shoulderstand. However some teachers recommend against going from the extreme of one range of motion to the other, so it is advised to rest on one's back for a few breaths before entering fish.

