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Headstand Yoke

instructions for use

Please read these instructions before using your Headstand Yoke

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The **Headstand Yoke** has been developed to support yoga practitioners in learning and practising Salamba Sirsasana (head balance or headstand).

The **Headstand Yoke** is based on a form of support developed by BKS Iyengar, the world's foremost hatha yoga teacher.

The practice of Salamba Sirsasana

Salamba Sirsasana is one the iconic asanas (poses) of Hatha Yoga. The pose is said to bring many benefits to the practitioner and is known as the "king of asanas".

Salamba Sirsasana is not to be practised in isolation but should be learnt and practiced as part of a complete yoga asana practice. We strongly advise those intending to learn Sirsasana to seek advice from an experienced yoga teacher. If this is not possible refer to *Light on Yoga*, by BKS Iyengar (Thorsons 2001).

In *Light on Yoga*, BKS Iyengar says that regular practice of this pose will benefit the health of the brain, the hormonal system, the circulatory system and blood, the lungs and the digestive system. "Regular and precise practice of Sirsasana develops the body, disciplines the mind, and widens the horizons of the spirit. One becomes balanced and self-reliant in pain and pleasure, loss and gain, shame and fame and defeat and victory."

General precautions

Salamba Sirsasana should not be practiced if you have any of the following conditions:

- high blood pressure;
- cervical Spondylosis;
- neck pain, backache headache or migraine.

In your practice:

- practice Sirsasana once only during a practice session;
- include Salamba Sarvangasana (shoulder stand) in your practice after headstand.

Inversion such as Sirsasana and Sarvangasana should not be practiced during menstruation. Ardha Sirsasana (half headstand) may be practiced during menstruation.

Precautions when using Yoke

IMPORTANT: Always practice against a wall. The top of the shoulder bars should rest on the wall (photo 1).

Come out of the pose if any pain is experienced.

Practice in a corner at first until a measure of balance from left to right is gained (photo 7). Take care to not fall sideways when lifting up into the pose.

Headstand Yoke set-up

The Yoke has three wooden parts, as in photo 1. The round centre prop is adjustable in length and intended to stand against a wall and to set the overall height of the apparatus. The two broad side bars are shoulder support bars intended to lift the shoulders.

The height and angle of the shoulder support bars is set by the adjustable centre prop. We suggest an initial setting of hole number 2 (second hole from bottom) (photo 2).



Use of Headstand Yoke

The base of the pose: The arms and head should always be placed carefully and deliberately (photo 3).

The fingers are fully interlocked but the palms remain broad (not together) The thumbs do not overlap. The back of the palms and outer wrists stand vertically.

The arms are on the outside of the shoulder bars. The elbows are set at shoulder width which means they are close to or touching the shoulder bars (photo 4).

The crown of the head (the top of the head above the ear holes, not the top of the forehead!) is placed on the mat in front of the hands. The base of the thumbs should touch the back of the skull (or occiput).

The shoulder bars can also be adjusted in and out from the centre. They should be adjusted so the trapezius muscles next to the neck rest on them, not the bony outer shoulder (photo 5).

Half headstand (Ardha Sirsasana): Once the base is in place come up onto the toes and walk in toward the wall until the spine is vertical or as close to vertical as possible (photo 6 overleaf).



Adjust your position if necessary so that the shoulders when raised up off the floor are well supported by the shoulder bars and the crown of the head just reaches the floor with a long neck. The shoulders should be well lifted away from the floor (photo 6). If the

shoulders do not touch the shoulder bars, move closer to the wall. Do not drop the shoulders in order to touch the shoulder bars.

Half Headstand is an asana in its own right as well as being an intermediate pose. We suggest that those new to Sirsasana and/or the Headstand Yoke practice this pose for some time to grow accustomed to the inverted head position and to practice lifting the shoulders away from the floor to lengthen the neck. Learn to press the whole length of the forearm to the floor including the wrist.

Full headstand: When practicing the full pose for the first time we suggest setting up in a corner to help with alignment and to minimise the possibility of falling sideways when lifting up to full Sirsasana (photo 7).

From Half Headstand kick up one leg at a time (photo 8) being careful to kick up straight and not to the side. If you do not feel balanced through this process you must use a corner or have an assistant to help you up.



- Breathe smoothly through the nose;
- Eventually learn to balance free of the wall (photo 11).

The Headstand Yoke as a guide

With experience learn to lift the weight of the shoulders free of the Headstand Yoke so that the support is used only as a guide to indicate when the shoulders are dropping. As confidence is gained and if no pain in the neck is experienced, practice without the Headstand Yoke.



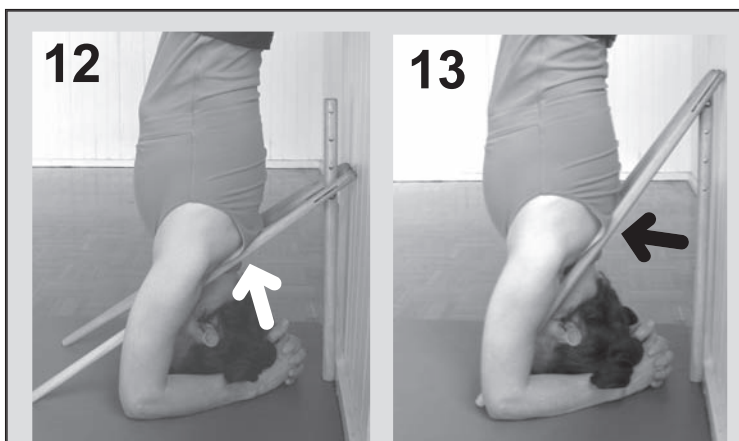
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Working in full headstand: Detailed instruction on the practice of Salamba Sirsasana can be obtained from a qualified yoga teacher or found in *Light on Yoga* or a number of other Iyengar yoga publications.

Some points are given here but this is not intended as definitive or complete instruction.

When in the pose:

- Lift the shoulders;
- Press the wrists down;
- Lengthen the neck;
- Stretch the legs up especially through the inner heels;
- Broaden the back thigh;
- Avoid bending deep into the lower back (photo 9) by stretching the legs and lengthening the lumbar spine. Lift the tail bone up (photo 10);



Adjusting the Headstand Yoke height

Setting the centre prop at a low height (photo 12) gives more vertical lift to the shoulder, setting the centre prop higher (photo 13) gives more horizontal lift to the shoulders and prevents them from dropping backward. We suggest using hole no. 2 initially (photo 2). With experience you may find another height which is more suited to your practice.