

My friend, the headstand

By Alya B. Honasan

Photograph by Ricky Villabona

Sub: In yoga, you never tick off a checklist of poses you can ‘do.’ It’s a constantly evolving relationship, as the author learned when she thought she had mastered her favorite pose

THERE are two questions that are most frequently thrown my way when people learn that I practice and teach yoga. “So, can you levitate?” is one of them, and one which I’ve learned to answer only with a smile or, if I’m in the mood, a “Maybe,” or a “No, I’m still working on the walking-on-nails part.”

The second is, “So, can you stand on your head?” It’s a legitimate question, and one I used to answer with a firm, almost arrogant “Yes.” That’s because for the style of yoga that I practice, Iyengar yoga, the headstand, *Salamba sirsasana*, the King of *Asanas* (poses), is supremely important. It’s pretty much the apex of your practice, requiring a great deal of strength and control, as well as the right state of mind, to execute. “Its mastery gives one balance and poise, both physically and mentally,” writes our beloved Guruji (“my teacher”), BKS Iyengar, in his book “Light on Yoga.”

It took me about a year of practice to learn to stand on my head, and then only after a year of regular classes. I started with my back against the wall, my muscles burning from the effort of balancing on my forearms and head like a tripod. The first few times, the weight seemed impossibly heavy; when you’re my size (5 foot 6, 170 lbs), carrying your entire body weight on the top of your head is a daunting prospect. I suffered neck pain and stiff shoulders, and my ears and face would immediately turn tomato red from the effort. It took some time before I got used to having the blood rush to my head.

Further training led to further refinement, and when I felt ready to try to get off the wall—always a milestone for a serious practitioner—I practiced relentlessly, surrounding myself with pillows to cushion my fall. And I fell often, sometimes bruising myself, but always bruising my ego and driving myself to frustration. I was taught to land on my feet, my lower back lifted off the ground to protect it, even as I rolled slowly onto my shoulders to spare my neck. “The best way to overcome fear is to face with equanimity the situation of which one is afraid,” writes Guruji, almost bemusedly, I think. “...To topple over while learning the headstand is not as terrible as we imagine. If one overbalances, one should remember to loosen the fingers, relax, go limp, and flex the knees. Then one will just roll over and smile.”

Always, ego kept pushing me to try it again, just one more time. Staying balanced for a few seconds could make my day, or ruin it. I slowly learned when to fall, and when to fight to keep my balance. I learned when to keep pushing, to the point of exhaustion—and when to let it go for another day.

I learned the many, many nuances of staying in a headstand. I learned how the smallest details were connected to each other, and how a headstand was a Gestalt exercise—the whole was much greater than the sum of its many parts. There was the need to let your shoulders work so your neck didn't have to do it all by itself. I had to remember to open my chest and not slouch, even if I was upside down and the world looked different. One day, my teacher Rina Ortiz made us stand on our heads blindfolded, a refreshing change of perspective—without the influence of sight, who was to judge what was upside down or right side up?

Thirty seconds, one minute, two minutes. By the time my fellow teachers and I went to Pune for the first time in 2006 to study at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, where Guruji lives, I was doing five-minute headstands. By the time we returned last year, with proper preparation, we were standing on our heads for 10 minutes, and the pose had become for us an exquisite form of meditation in motion—our bodies tingled with awareness and life, even as our minds grew soft, rested, and refreshed. We were coming down from our headstands with glowing faces.

I thoroughly enjoy teaching my students to stand on their heads, and particularly delight in helping a newcomer come up for the first time to experience what it feels like, because I want to share the exhilaration of the King of *Asanas*, which can help relieve everything from insomnia to clogged noses. My students and I have come up against many obstacles, from weak arms and backs to a simple but paralyzing fear of being upside down or falling. It helps that I'm bigger than most of my students; they believe me when I assure them I can catch them!

An important lesson I learned was that an *asana* was not another item on your to-do list. It's almost organic, changing with every day and each situation. Technique and practice give you the knowledge to execute a challenging pose, but some days are still better than others. There would be days when, rested and energetic, I was light as a feather and solid as a narra tree, so much so that Rina could rest a block on the soles of my feet and it would stay there. Some days, my neck would hurt, or I would sway like a bamboo, or my arms would throb from the effort. You never quite “conquer” a pose; you learn to respect it and allow it to reveal itself to you, with whatever gifts it brings.

Unfortunately, that was the lesson I forgot. Just a month ago, just when I thought I had it down pat—a piece of cake, just one of those things—I lost it. My *sirsasana* flew away like some restless bird. I kind of knew the reason: I had gotten lazy, coming up with legs bent to my chest instead of the requisite straight legs simply because it was easier, until one day, I found I couldn't lift my legs anymore and felt like a sack of potatoes. When my ascent was shot, the rest of the pose fell apart. I would struggle to come up, only to fall over in the other direction, a roller coaster with no brakes. Rina called me once to demonstrate the pose in class, and to my chagrin, I was a mess, hopping in futility. I was livid from frustration and irritation at myself.

Rina and my fellow teachers came to the rescue, dissecting my sudden “asana block.” Was I not pressing my arms down enough? Was my back curving in? Was I not walking

in far enough until my feet could just lift up automatically? Finally, my teacher simply said, “Don’t worry. It will come back.”

There was a time early on when I let another pose stump me so much, it made me cry. Only after relaxing and letting it come naturally did I manage to do it, conquering a fear of breaking my neck. Fortunately, I still remembered how that turned out, but I still had to do my time to befriend my headstand again, propping myself up against the wall for the first time in years, and experiencing all over again what it was like to struggle for balance and lose. I was even too proud to put any pillows around me, and I paid for it with a painful wrist. *Sirsasana* was putting me in my place, and reminding me of where I stood in the bigger scheme of things.

I’m happy to report that my *sirsasana* has returned, and I have learned to view it with more humility and respect. I never assume anymore that it will be a breeze; I prepare for the pose, open my heart, and ask it to let me in. It’s yet another life lesson learned from my yoga practice: you do your best, but at some point, the universe takes over. And you simply must have faith that one day, you’ll be strong and balanced again—even when your world is turned upside down.