Sirshaasanam

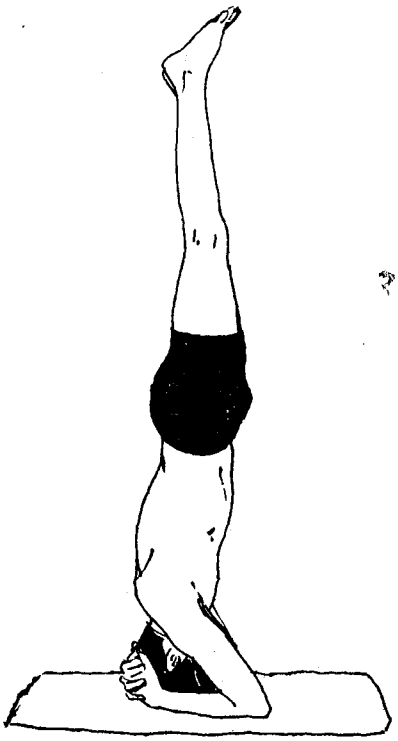
By S. Ramaswami

The ability to stand on one's head unaided for the first time, brings the same sense of elation as a child seems to get when it stands on its feet for the first time unaided. Sirshasanam holds the pride of place among all asanas. Yoga teachers and practitioners, ancient and modern, have spent considerable time on the practice and study of physiological, and mental effects. Medical practitioners and researchers interested in Yoga, give considerable importance to it and study the effects on the whole system. Unable to get large numbers of subjects who practice Sirshasanam, some researchers have even gone to the extent of using mice in an inverted position in a glass tube or novices to be kept inverted on an inclined plane, to study the effects of Sirshasanam. The best research in yoga is for one to experiment on oneself and feel the effects.

It is common knowledge that in the normal erect position, the main organs of perception—ears, eyes and brain do not get a copious supply of blood as they are situated above the heart. Again, when we breathe normally which is partly diaphragmatic the vital organs, such as liver spleen, kidneys, diaphragm, etc., get pressed and displaced from their positions —albeit to a small extent. According to Yogic theory, disease is due to the displacement of vital internal organs and muscles and the yogic practice is resorted to bring them to their original positions. The Rishis have sought to remedy this situation by adopting many topsy turvy postures, as Sarvangasana, Sirshasana, Pinchamayuraasanam, etc., of which Sirshasanam is the foremost.

In Sirshasanam, gravity aids in the free flow of blood to the organs of perception. It is both curative and preventive. However, Sirshasanam requires considerable preparation of the body. Especially for those who are obese, it is imperative that the body acquires some suppleness (laghava) by practise of mudras (especially mahaamudra) and praanaayamas in such postures as Padmaasanam, Vajraasanam, etc., before attempting asanas like Sirshasanam.

Sayanacharya's commentary on Patanjala Yogasutras gives considerable practical details that are helpful in the practice and mastery of many asanas. The main objective of Sirshasanam is not merely to arrange for a copious blood supply to the head and upper limbs of the body as shoulders, neck, back, etc., but also to slow down the respiratory rate. It is the contention of yogis that one's predetermined life span is measured in terms of breaths and not in absolute time. Thus yogis have always attempted to prolong the life span in terms of time by reducing the number of breaths per unit time. The word Praanaayama means lengthening the breath and also lengthening life span. In that, Sirshasanam has a very important role to play



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Thus when Sirshasanam is well mastered (A s a n a Siddhi), then the breathing rate which is normally about 15-20 per minute, automatically comes to about 4 per minute. This is within the capacity of any one who would spend the time necessary and earnest about it. However the aim should be to reduce it to about 2 per minute. Thus at this rate it is normal to do 24 - breaths spread over 12 minutes.

Sirshasanam should always be done in the morning—it is laid down by authorities on yoga. And as a counter, it is to be followed by an equal length of time in the practice of Sarvangasanam. The procedure will be to do Sirshasanam 24 breaths. Then it is to be followed by rest of about 2 minutes, lying down in Savaasanam. Then Sarvaangasanam for the equal number of 24 breaths, followed by some sitting posture as Padmaasanam for a few breaths, until one feels normal and relaxed. This is the method of progression or Vinyaasam. Even Sirshasanam should be done only after a few preparatory exercises, like Sarvangasanam, certain Bhandhas and Mudras, as mentioned earlier.

BRAIN IS HELPED

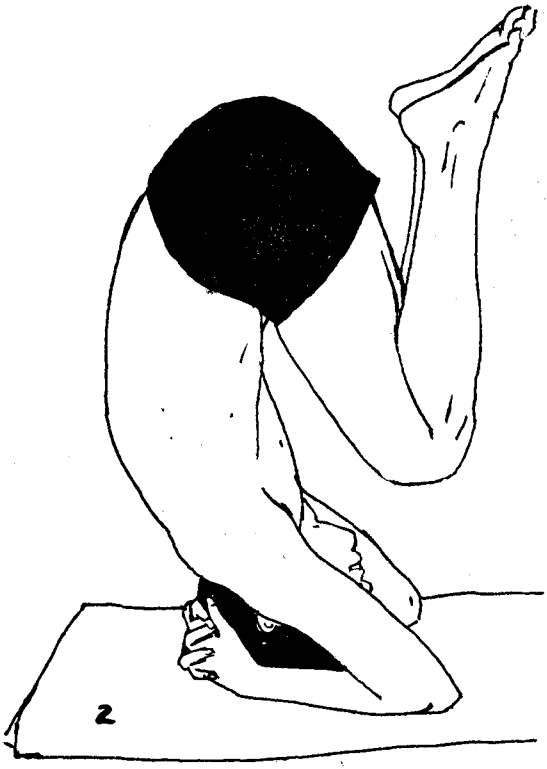
In Sirshasanam, the brain and the glands therein get a better supply of blood and the internal organs in the body get displaced upwards. The two minutes rest is used to normalise. Similarly in Sarvangasanam, the organs are displaced, but the flow of blood to head is restricted (it is the case if one does Sarvangasana properly with the chin pressing against the chest making a Bandha). In this the thyroid and the upper part of the body get extra supply of blood. The rest period helps to normalise. Then when a sitting posture is taken up for practice, the internal organs retain their proper position. This group of asanas therefore help to restore the equilibrium state of the vital organs as liver, kidneys, prostate, etc. This is the reason behind doing those postures in that particular order.

The breathing pattern in Sirshasanam requires some attention. As mentioned, there are four distinct steps in breathing in yogaasana practice. One should practice normal inhalation (Purakam), no deliberate holding after inhalation in the initial stages of practice and a long exhalation (Rechakam). However, during the changeover from

Purakam to Rechakam there is an interval of about two seconds when there is a pause in the gathi of Praana. However, after some practice, Kumbhakam, say upto 5 seconds after inhalation and upto 10 seconds after exhalation (Bahya Kumbhakam) may be practised. It is during this Bahya Kumbhaka one should slowly start practising Mulabandha and Uddiyanabandha also. If one is steady (sthira) and comfortable (Sukha) in this posture then the effects of the Bandhas are accentuated due to the help of gravity also. Actually after a few minutes of practice the muscles of the legs, thighs, glutial, even chest, back shoulders and neck relax and with this muscles not being required to maintain the tone, the pereneal and rectal muscles also could be drawn in to get good Mula and Uddiyana Bandhas. Sirshasana, which is also known as Kapaalasana and Brahmasanam, depending upon the contact part of the head on the ground (this is however to be learnt from great yogis who could only tell the difference) lends itself to a variety of vinyaasas.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

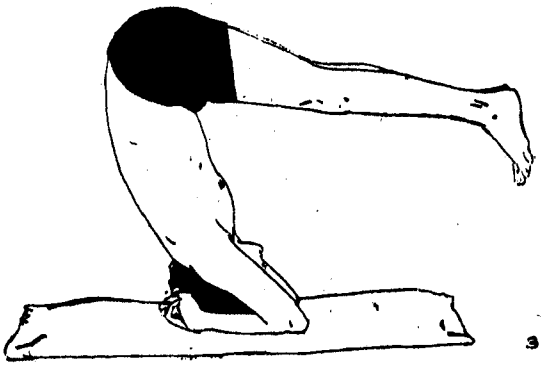
Some research done so far on headstand confirm most of the views expressed in the traditional book, though some claims appear to be inconclusive, as adepts in yoga are not easily available for study. It is found that due to the inverted nature of the posture and a relaxation in the leg muscles, the pressure in the legs drop from nearly 200 mg. to about 20 or 30 mg. However, there does not seem to be such a rush of blood to the head, as is normally believed. In fact a few years back when yoga was not that popular as it is today, many people were advised not to do Sirshasana as it may precipitate a stroke due to increased flow and pressure in the brain venals. However, it is found that the blood flow to the head is not that appreciable as to cause any serious damage, as due to auto regulation the body adjusts the flow, by constriction. But then it is sufficient



to dilate many capillaries that are hitherto closed and helps to improve oxygen supply to many cells not sufficiently oxygenated. Thus different parts of the brain that can never be helped during normal standing or sitting position appear to be helped during Sirshasanam. One has to admit that people with higher Blood Pressure, or retinal problem are well advised to be cautious and do them under expert guidance. In cases of mild heart condition, it appears to help increase pressure on the shoulders and back which stimulates the brain to reduce the blood pressure. It is therefore, found that if one practices Sirshaasanam regularly one finds the pulse rate reduces significantly thereby reducing the strain on the heart. There is a reduction in Blood Pressure also.

MEMORY IMPROVES

The circulation of cerebro-spinal fluid is increased to a greater degree than in any other exercise. If properly done, it increases brain capacity and memory power. It has some sedative effect, and many people suffering from insomnia respond well to Sirshaasanam. It has tonic effect on the testes, ovaries and pelvis by removal of congestion. Gastro Intestinal diseases are treated. Varicose veins tend to disappear. Liver and spleen also could be exercised with gravity and Bandhas. The leg muscles, knee joints and the stubborn hip joints become suppler in course of time. Some of the variations like Urdhwapadsana in Sirshasanam tend to enhance the effects.



It is hypothesised by a medical doctor that Sirshasanam seems to stimulate the nerve centres responsible for bronchial tube dilatation and as such is highly beneficial to asthmatics. Further there is draining of the bronchial tubes, and hence beneficial to those suffering from respiratory ailments.

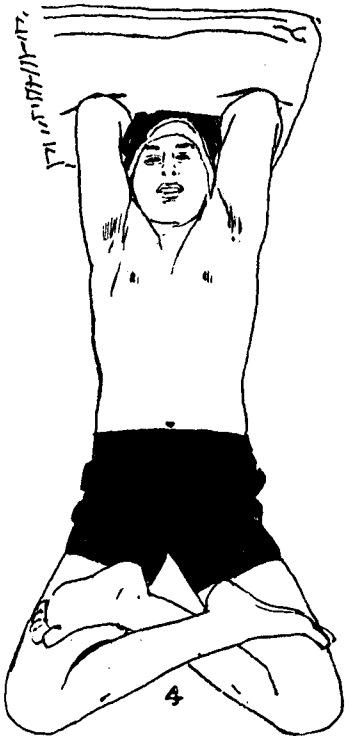
The Bandhas in Sirshaasanam help in eradicating piles in the early stages and prolapse (rectal and vaginal) in the early stages. Hence it is a good post natal exercise. Even in certain antenatal cases, if the patient had been practising the posture before pregnancy, it may be continued under proper guidance during pregnancy, as it helps better circulation. Certain cases of retroversion of uterus could be helped, in the early stages. Some women are known to have practised all through their pregnancy. I have seen students of my Acharya, encouraged by him, doing Sirshaasanam during advanced stages of pregnancy.

METHODOLOGY

Just as Sirshasana is an exceptionally gre t yogic posture, many find it extremely difficult to attain the posture and become steady and comfortable to derive the full benefits. Some have a natural tendency and a good sense of balance and they attain the posture easily. But others have considerable

difficluty. It is better to practise Sirshaasana under proper guidance. Having prepared well one's body, especially the neck and shoulders with *Sarvangasanam* and other arm movements, one may attempt to do Sirshaasanam. Use a soft carpet, folded into four. In the initial stages it is advisable, rather necessary to use the wall as support.

Start with Samasthithi. Exhale proceed to do Utkatasanam and then *Vajrasanam*. Then exhaling bend forward, keeping the elbows and hands on the ground, fingers



interlocked but turned inward, the sides of small fingers remaining in the ground. Keep the head between the cupped palms, the head itself remaining about 2 to 3 inches away from the wall. Slowly exhale, press the elbows, hands and little fingers, stretch the legs, pushing the back towards the wall, arching it in the process, keeping the top of the head as the fulcrum. In the process the legs and feet are also drawn towards the body a little, 'walking' on the big toes in the process. Stay for a few breaths, then as the small back touches the wall, holding the breath after exhalation, with a slight push transfer the weight of the body to the head back on the wall and taking the feet off the ground. The legs also may be bent in the process, so that the knees are a few inches above the chin (Refer to Sketch 2). Stay for a few breaths, getting a feel for balance. Then slowly stretch the legs on inhalation and keep the heels on the wall. One should keep the neck, body and legs straight, and thighs, knees and ankles together. Stay for a few breaths. Now again on exhalation, bend the knees, return to position as in sketch (2). Stay for a few breaths. On next exhalation lower the legs and return to *Vajrasanam*. This process may be repeated few times.

PRACTICE HELPS

After some practice, try to pull the body (back, buttocks) away from the wall, keeping only the heels on the wall for support. Try to keep the ankles stretched. After gaining some confidence, draw one leg away completely from the wall, stay for a few breaths and return to the wall. Repeat on the other side. Thereafter, one should attempt to take both the heels away from the wall and practice *Sirshaasanam*, repeatedly returning to the wall for support. Day by day, one will be able to attain a good balance.

After a few days' practice (some take weeks or even months), one should try to go up purely on the strength and control of the elbows, shoulder and neck muscles barely touching the wall while going up or coming down. After repeated practice one may attempt to do the posture in a place away from the wall.

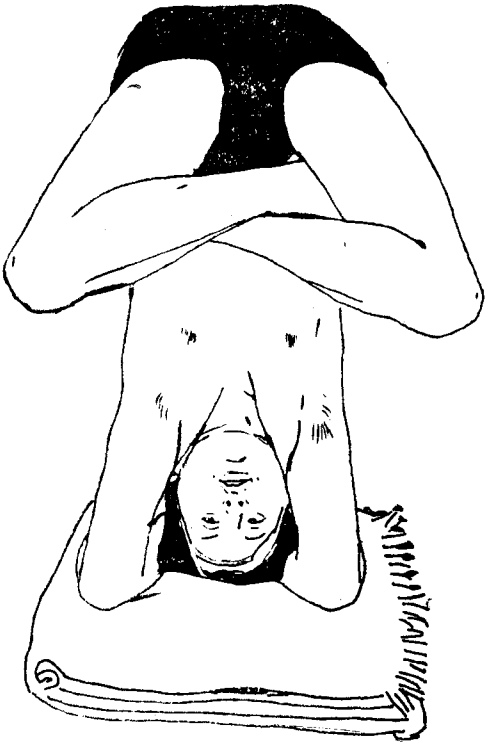
There are advantages in trying to practice against the corner of the room. It helps to prevent lateral movements of the body and legs and avoid distortions and consequent pain in the neck, shoulders etc. However it is better to learn the posture from a teacher.

SOME VARIATIONS

Sketch (1) shows Sirshasana. The head point should be the top (crown) of the head; however one has to make minor adjustments almost continuously. The elbows should be used considerably in the initial stages to attain and maintain balance. Later on, it may be possible to remove the arms away from the head for Niralamba and other variations of Sirshasanam, pertaining to the variations of the arms. Then there are Vinyasas possible due to variation in the positions of the leg, spine etc. Sirshasanam, perhaps affords scope for the maximum number of variations and movements.

A few variations are described. Bending the legs and lowering them known as Aakunchanaasanam is good for exercising the shoulders and getting a good control over head stand posture. Aakunchanam (Sketch 4) is done on exhalation and one may return to Sirshasanam on inhalation. Further one may stay in Aakunchanasanam for a few breaths, say up to 6 or so.

Another variation would call for exhaling and arching the back, to lower the legs straight and parallel to the ground. Good control of elbows and shoulder muscles are required. It is known



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as Urdhwadandaasanam (Refer sketch 3). It has a very good effect on abdomenal muscles and helps to strengthen them. Inhale return to Sirshasanam. Perhaps one of the more fascinating variations is Urdhwapadmasanam in Sirshasanam. Firstly in Sirshasanam, exhale and spread the legs, when it is known as Urdhwa Konasanam. Now exhale bend left leg, keeping the foot on the right thigh. On the next exhalation, complete Padmasanam, while in Sirshasanam. This is Urdhwapadmaasanam. Refer sketch 4.

Now exhale, bend at the hips and fold the Padmasanam by bringing the knees towards the body, bending at the hip. This is Aakunchita Urdhwa Padmaasanam. Refer to sketch 5. Now exhaling further arch the back and lower the legs in Padmaasanam so that it is in front of the chest (Refer 6). This, according to a few authors is called Pindasanam in Sirshasanam, as it resembles foetus (Refer also to Pindasanam in an earlier issue on Sarvangasanam). It is also known as Viparita Yoga Mudra. Inhale return to Urdhwa Padmaasanam and then on to Sirshasanam on next inhalation. Repeat with right leg crossed first for Padmaasanam and to the movements.

BODY IS VERSATILE

One may go up in Sirshasana by bending the knees as described earlier and straight also, reaching Urdhwadandaasanam half way through. It is also possible to go up to Urdhwa Padmasanam from Padmaasanam straight. One may also return to Padmasanam, by retracing the steps from Urdhwapadmaasanam, Aakunchita Urdhwa Padmaasanam, Pindasanam and then touching the ground with the knees, releasing the head from the Sirshasanam position and back to Padmaasanam or Parvataasanam. Youngsters will love to do asanas when interespersed with such variations and get to appreciate what a beautiful, versatile dextrous piece of equipment the body is. Only a few variations have been mentioned here.

Well, it is nice to stand on one's own head, after all.