

CULTURAL POSES

ŚĪRSHĀSANA OR THE TOPSYTURVY POSE

THE NAME:

The pose is called Śīrshāsana because it requires the student to stand on the head. Śīrsha means the *head* in Saṁskṛita, and Āsana means a *Yogic pose*.

THE TECHNIQUE:

To begin with the student kneels on his seat and prepares a finger-lock by pushing the fingers of his right hand between those of the left till their roots are well-knit together. Then in his front, he makes a convenient angle with his forearms, the finger-lock serving as the vertex. (*vide* Fig. 23). Then he places his head at the vertex. For this purpose the hinder part of the top of the head is to be used and not the part nearer the forehead. The reason is that during the balanced condition, as illustrated in Figs. 24 to 29, the spine must stand as erect as possible, so that it can easily bear the burden of the whole body. If the front part is employed the spine would suffer a curve in the cervical region and put an unnecessary strain upon it. All this time the student is kneeling on his seat as shown in Fig. 23. After this he slowly raises his trunk lifting up the lower end of it, and tries to hold it perpendicular to the ground. For this purpose he puts the weight of his trunk on three points; the two elbows and the head supported by the finger lock. He gradually raises his knees and brings his toes nearer to his face. When the trunk supported on the head is sufficiently thrown backward, the student finds that he could lift his toes from the ground without standing in danger of a collapse. (*vide* Fig. 24). All these movements he accomplishes very smoothly and does not give any jerks to his body, for they are likely to upset the balance rather than establish it. He then draws his knees to his chest, folds his legs, straightens his back, and tries to be firm in his balance in this position. (*vide* Fig. 25). The practice of this first stage

of Śîrshāsana is continued over some days, so that the muscles get used to it and their work becomes easy.

When the student can do this first part of the Āsana with ease and grace, his remaining task is very simple. In the second stage, he is simply to straighten out his thighs and bring them in a line with the trunk. (*vide* Fig. 26). Here the balance is never allowed to go to the back side. The whole work is smoothly accomplished by contracting the muscles of the back and the buttocks. The third and the last stage is reached when the legs are opened out; and the whole frame stands at right angles to the ground. (*vide* Fig. 27).

Just as ordinarily we do not feel the slightest burden of our body on any part of it, while we are standing on the legs, so by practice, the student, in this pose, does not experience any burden, as the whole body stands perfectly balanced, and the weight is evenly distributed over its different parts.

The balance required for Śîrshāsana is best secured by the methods indicated in the last three paragraphs. People look to be under the impression that they could start their practice of this pose by throwing up their legs, if they could get somebody to hold them up in the air; or failing the services of an intelligent living being, even if they could get a dead wall for support. The legs are tossed with violent jerks, and these hasty people often find themselves playing the part of a tumbler, only minus his acrobatic skill! Even if they fare better, the psychological need of a support continues to be felt all along and these persons always feel insecure in this posture, even after months of daily practice. But students who try to go without any outside help from the very beginning, obtain the necessary skill in a few days.

After maintaining the Āsana across the necessary length of time, the student returns to his normal position by retracing the same steps through which he attains the full pose.

Great care must be taken about the period to be devoted to this practice. The best way is to start with 15 seconds and to increase the time very cautiously. Every symptom should be watched and the least possibility of overdoing one's part be avoided. If proper precautions are taken, there is absolutely nothing in this pose which might lead to trouble. The maximum period should be 24 minutes. We have

seen, however, a number of people practising this Āsana for more than half an hour every day, and thereby maintaining very sound health. Some of these are past fifty, and in their communications addressed to us, bear eloquent testimony to the manifold advantages a regular practice of this pose can give.

The maximum of 24 minutes mentioned in the last paragraph has been prescribed for the pose when it is practised *by itself*. If Śīrshāsana is undertaken *as a part* of the daily Yogic exercises, the longest time that should be devoted to it is only twelve minutes.

Limitations:

Although Śīrshāsana is available to every man of average health, there are particular limitations which require careful attention. These limitations are as enumerated below.

1. People suffering from aching or running ears should avoid Śīrshāsana.
2. The pose is contra-indicated not only during the time when the disease is active, but even for some time after the trouble has subsided.
3. Persons having weak eye capillaries should avoid Śīrshāsana. If, however, these eye capillaries are strengthened by other exercises, Śīrshāsana would be available afterwards.
4. Individuals recording blood pressure above 150 and below 100 mm. Hg. habitually, should not take to Śīrshāsana on their own responsibility. They should consult an expert.
5. Persons with a weak heart should practise Śīrshāsana very cautiously. If standing on the head sets up palpitations the pose should be definitely avoided.
6. Serious cases of chronic nasal catarrh are made worse by the practice of Śīrshāsana. In the initial stage, however, nasal catarrh can be effectively treated by means of this pose.
7. Constipated persons passing excessively dry stool should avoid Śīrshāsana.

8. The practice of Śīrshāsana should never be undertaken immediately after any violent exercise. At least twenty minutes should be allowed to go by.

CULTURAL ADVANTAGES:

All the activities of man, whether mental or physical, are governed from the brain. The whole nervous system which spreads throughout the body like a network of wires, is directly or indirectly connected with this organ. When a man stands on his head he sends a richer supply of the arterial blood to the brain and thus maintains the health of not only the brain itself, but of the whole nervous system.

The organs of the sense of sight, smell, hearing and taste depend for their efficient functioning upon the different centres situated in the brain. Śīrshāsana exercises a very beneficial influence upon the health of these centres and preserves the efficiency of the sense organs.

Some of the most important endocrine glands are situated above the heart. When a man stands upside-down these glands are richly supplied with the fresh blood and their health is promoted. The pineal gland and the pituitary body get the greatest advantage. The thyroid and the parathyroids have also their share in this advantage; but it is not so large.

Organs of digestion are immediately benefited because of Śīrshāsana. The blood circulating through these organs passes to the liver through the portal vein, which in its turn drains it into the inferior vena cava. In the Topsy-turvy pose this portal circulation of the venous blood is very greatly helped because of the inverted position of the body. It is a general physiological rule that an organ which can satisfactorily drain its venous blood gets a rich supply of the fresh blood from the arteries. The portal circulation of the venous blood being satisfactorily established, the organs of digestion get a richer supply of the arterial blood, and are made healthier for it. Thus it will be seen that Śīrshāsana beneficially influences the health of the nervous system, of the endocrine system, and of the digestive system, the last including the organs of excretion. As the general well-being of an individual depends upon the satisfactory functioning of the systems mentioned just now, Śīrshāsana is a very great help in maintaining one's general health and promoting organic vigour.

THERAPEUTICAL ADVANTAGES:

Under CULTURAL ADVANTAGES we have said that Śīrshāsana favourably influences the nervous, the endocrine and the digestive systems. Now if any of these systems go out of order diseases arise. These diseases, under particular circumstances, can be treated with Śīrshāsana.

NEURASTHENIA—This is a disease developing out of the degeneration of nerves. The symptoms which mark this disease are lack of energy, a sense of fulness and pressure at the top of the head, easy fatigue, dullness, failure of memory, want of sleep, dyspepsia and constipation. All these symptoms are due to one cause, the degeneration of nerve-centres. Now as all the nerve-centres are directly or indirectly connected with the brain, these systems can be treated by treating the brain by means of Śīrshāsana.

DYSPEPSIA & CONSTIPATION—These two diseases develop when the organs of digestion go out of order. If the digestive disorder is due to defective blood circulation or to the degenerated nervous mechanism, it can be set right by means of Śīrshāsana.

CONGESTED THROAT—Congestion in the throat, especially if it is due to dyspeptic conditions can be relieved by Śīrshāsana.

CONGESTED LIVER & SPLEEN—The liver and the spleen very often become congested. This congestion can be relieved by establishing free blood circulation in these organs by means of Śīrshāsana.

VISCEROPTOSIS—Due to the weakness of the abdominal muscles and consequent presence of constipation, the abdominal viscera have a tendency to drop into the pelvic region. This disease is known as visceroptosis. The trouble can be considerably counteracted by Śīrshāsana.

HERNIA—This disease can be effectively checked in its incipient stage and may be kept under fair control even after it has established itself. When Śīrshāsana is being practised for a cure of hernia, great care must be taken to get the technique of the pose modified according to the needs of the individual. For this modification expert advice is imperative.

SEMINAL WEAKNESS—Due to the situation of the seminal sacks between the bladder and the rectum, frequently nocturnal discharges take place in the latter part of the night, because both the bladder and the rectum happen to be loaded during these hours especially in the case of constipated people. These discharges can be checked by the practice of Śīrshāsana.

Many people suffer from the trouble of premature ejaculations and also of wet dreams, because their genitals are congested with the venous blood. When this is the case, Śīrshāsana is found to be of great help.

ASTHMA—Śīrshāsana can be taken advantage of in the cure of particular types of asthma, especially of the nervous and hepatic types.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF ŚĪRSHASANA

The different stages through which the full Topsyturvy Pose can be attained, have been stated up to now. When the Yogic culturist practises this Āsana for some days, he gets a complete control of his body and finds himself so thoroughly balanced that he can throw his limbs into different folds and twists, without fearing a collapse, although he continues to stand on the head all the while. Then it is time for him to go into the further development.

FIRST DEVELOPMENT

THE TECHNIQUE:

Instead of keeping the legs erect, they are to be folded into a foot-lock. This constitutes the first development. For this purpose the student bends one of his legs, preferably the right, in the knee-joint; and folding it upon the right thigh, sets the same in the opposite hip-joint, so that the right heel lies at the root of the left thigh and the upturned sole stretches itself along the same towards the knee. (*vide* Fig. 28). One may find it difficult to secure this adjustment at once. In that case the right foot might be set anywhere on the opposite thigh, and then slid down to the required position with the help of muscle contraction, the upper part of the contracted foot all the while pressing upon the thigh.

During this attempt the student should maintain his balance throwing the weight of his legs a *little* to the front, so that he would find it easier to recover it, should he chance to lose the same in his movements. It is our common experience that we are generally able to save ourselves from a fall, should we tend to fall forward; but we are sure to come to the ground, should we lose our balance in the opposite direction. This is because a tendency to fall forward is counteracted by the back muscles of the legs, as they immediately begin to act from the foot, which by its contraction and adjustment gives a good support to the legs. In a backward fall, however, there is no support, and the balance, once lost, can rarely be regained. The same principle applies to Śīrshāsana. The head and the forearms resting on the ground form a good support for the whole body; and taking the place of the foot in our ordinary standing, save the Yogic culturist from a forward fall. Here the muscles of the upper extremities and the thorax act just as the muscles of the legs in our usual standing position. But a tendency to fall backward can scarcely be checked; because there is nothing that can effectively support the head from behind. The finger-lock offers little help in this respect.

When the right foot is properly set in its place, the left leg is bent in the knee and similarly adjusted in the right hip-joint. This completes the first development. The whole spine stands erect and the foot-lock is held in a line with the trunk.

Now this foot-lock is characteristic of Padmāsana, and as the foot-lock is held aloft in this development of Śīrshāsana (*vide* Fig. 28), this development is known as Utthitordhva Padmāsana (meaning *Hoisted Padmāsana*), in Yogic literature. Utthita means *raised* and Ūrdhva means *aloft* in Saṁskṛita.

SECOND DEVELOPMENT

After maintaining the foot-lock straight for a while, the student folds it upon his abdomen through the hip-joint. (*vide* Fig. 29). When the folded legs touch the abdomen, the foot-lock is slid down along the thorax to the arm-pits. This completes the second development as shown in Fig. 30. This part of the Āsana is accomplished by throwing into powerful contractions the abdominal muscles and vigorously stretching the back muscles and the spine.

THIRD DEVELOPMENT

The third and the last development is reached, when the trunk is flexed upon the arms, through the shoulder-joints, the foot-lock still resting in the arm-pits. The whole body is folded in almost every important joint and is thrown, as it were, into a knot! (*vide* Fig. 31). The whole spine and the back form a regular curve and the abdominal muscles experience the most vigorous contraction.

NOTE—

At times the student starts his Śīrshāsana not with his free legs, but with his legs folded in a lock. (For the method of forming a foot-lock, read Matsyāsana). In that case he reaches the third development first; and then going through the second and first developments, he ultimately unfolds his foot-lock and holds his lower extremities straight in the air to attain the full pose of Śīrshāsana. It will be seen that this procedure merely reverses the different stages described in the technique and further developments of Śīshāsana in the foregoing pages.

When this procedure is followed the student has to start with a foot-lock and has to take Utthitordhvapadmāsana before attaining the full pose of Śīrshāsana.

CULTURAL ADVANTAGES:

These three developments of Śīrshāsana constitute an excellent exercise for the deep and superficial muscles of the back as well as for the muscles of the abdomen. While standing on the head, these developments may be traced and retraced; and when this folding and unfolding is repeated several times, all the muscles of the trunk are alternately contracted and relaxed.

THERAPEUTICAL ADVANTAGES:

These developments are somewhat strenuous and should not be taken advantage of in therapeutical work.

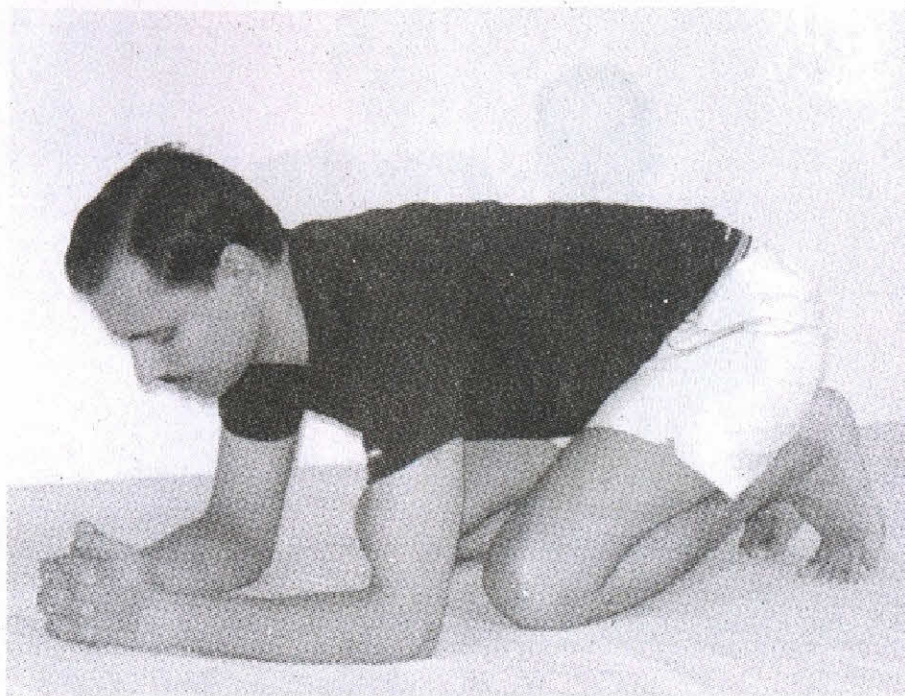


Fig. 23 : Preparation for Śirshāsana

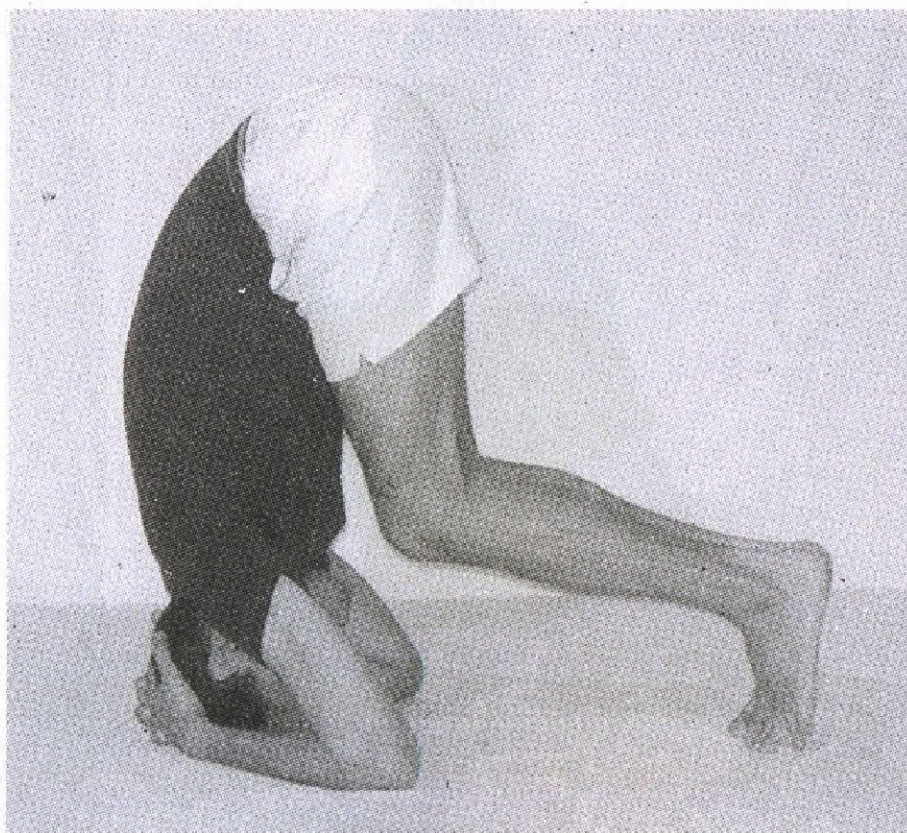


Fig. 24 : Śirshāsana (*Starting Balance*)

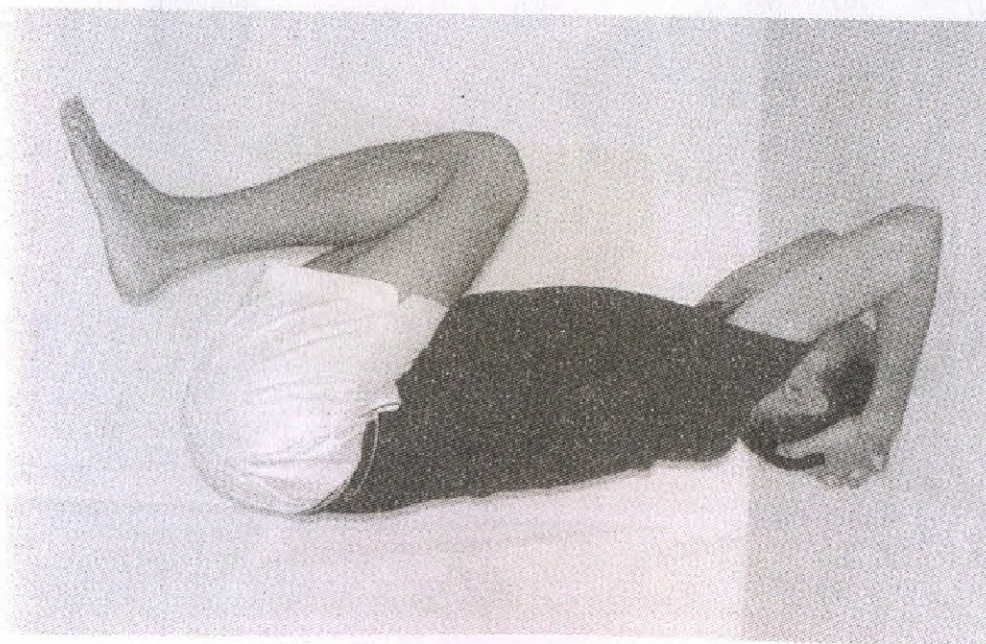


Fig. 25 : Śirshāsana
(With Legs Thighs Folded)

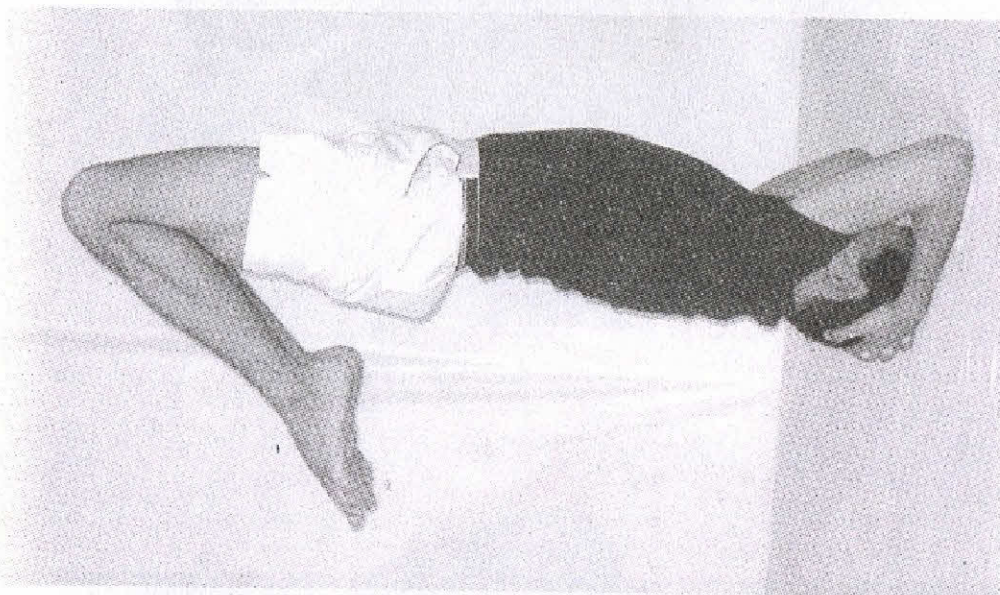


Fig. 26 : Śirshāsana
(With Thighs Extended)

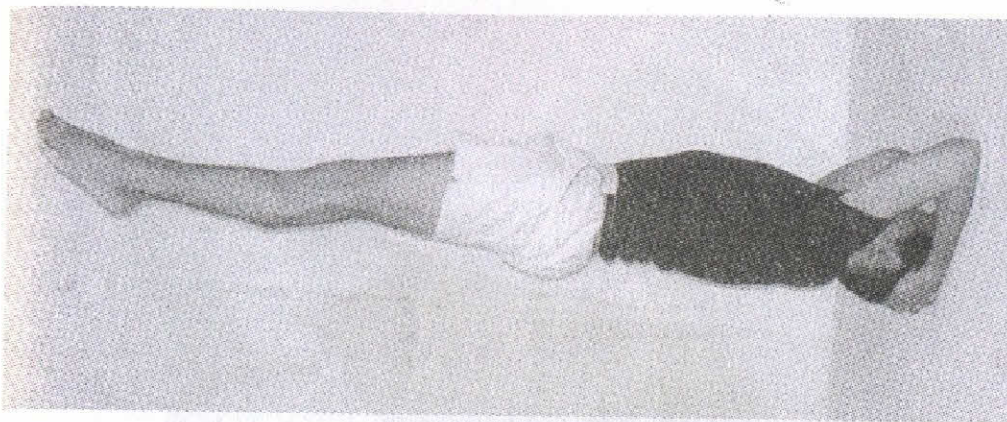


Fig. 27 : Śirshāsana or
the Topsy-turvy Pose

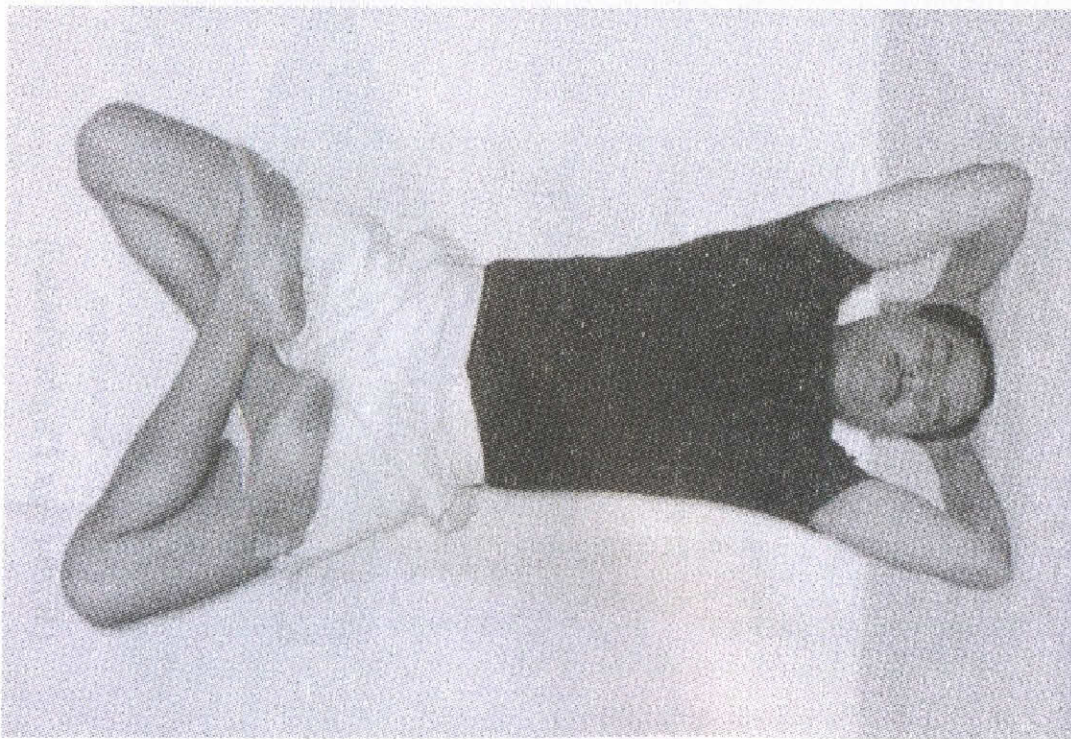


Fig. 28 : Śirshāsana (First Development)

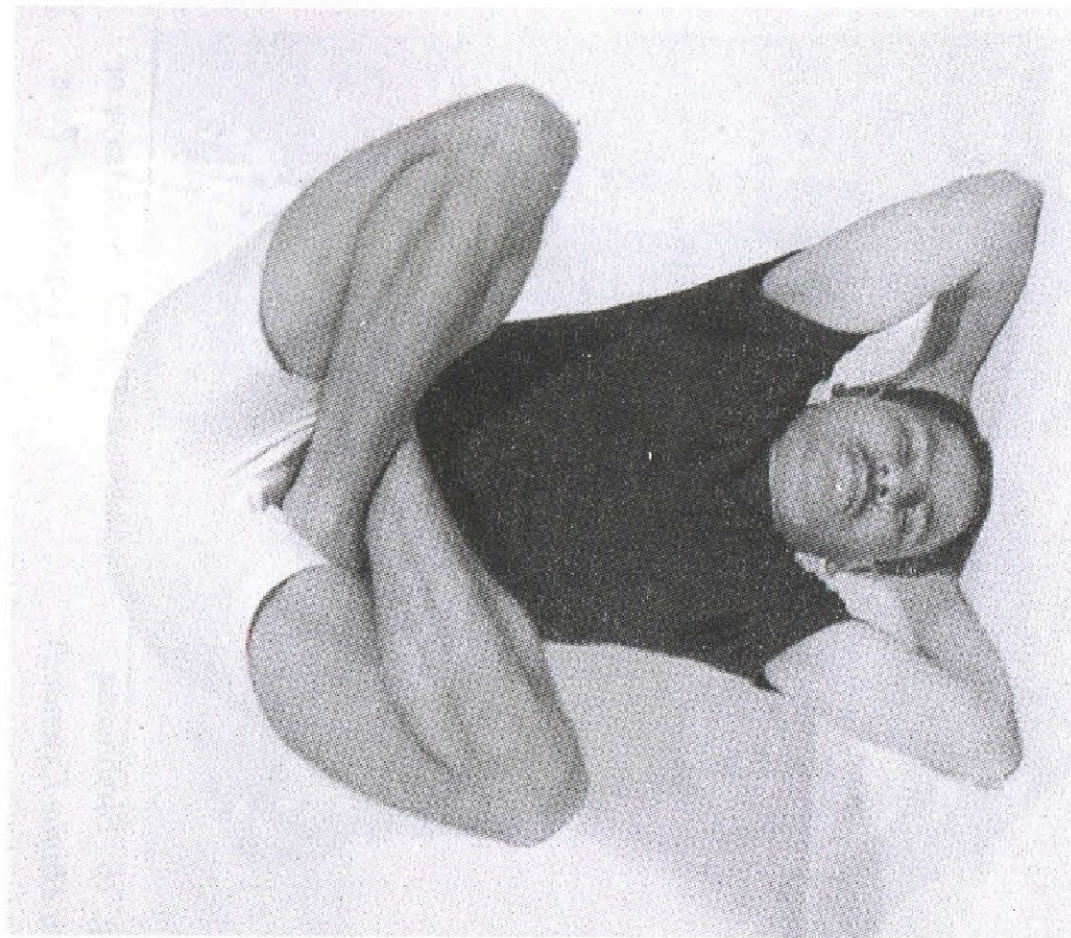


Fig. 29 : Śirshāsana (Towards Second Development)

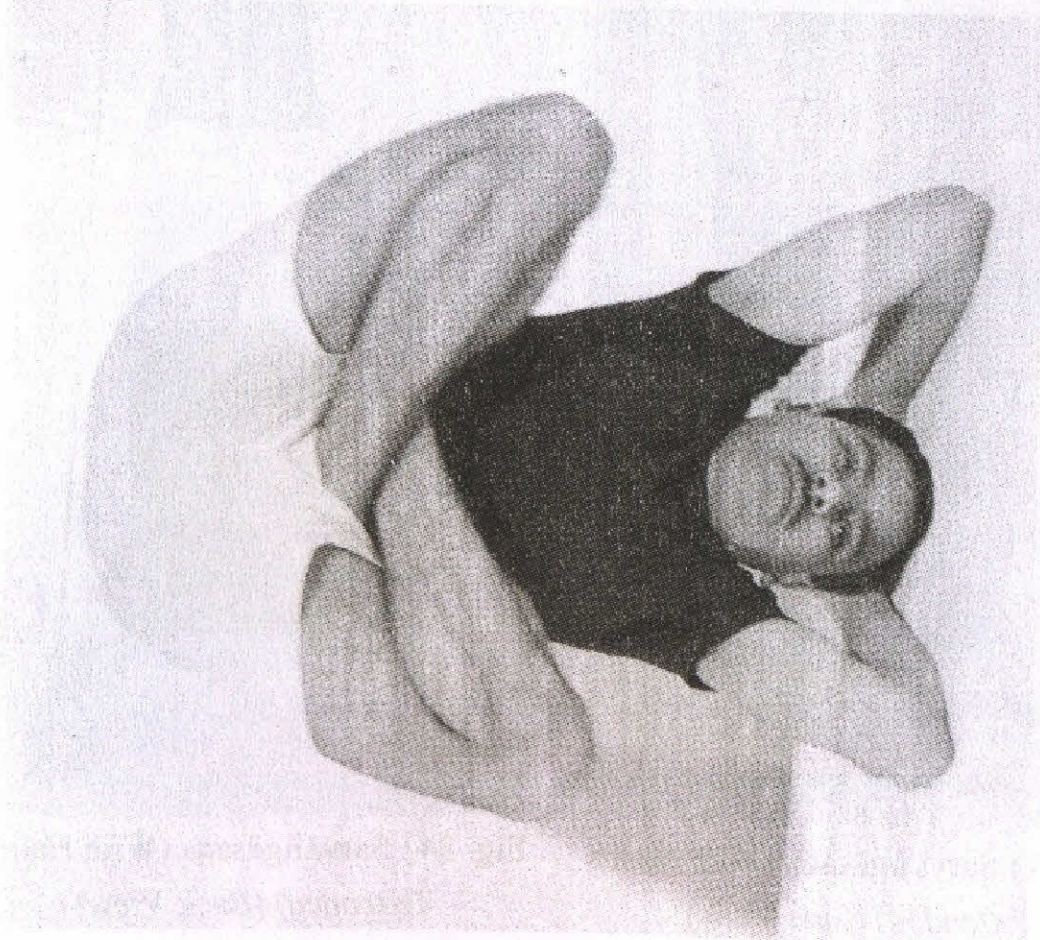


Fig. 30 : Śīrshāsana (Second Development)



Fig. 31 : Śīrshāsana (Third Development)