

## 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 Sanskrit, 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.

