

Inversions

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE



Introduction

- Head below level of the heart
- Changes the body's relationship to gravity
- Many types and variations – differing levels of intensity
- Can include other movements e.g. flexion, axial extension

“Inversions are about being radically present” Judith Hanson Lasater

Effects & Benefits

- Encourages us to see things from a different perspective
- Can energise or generate calm
- Develops courage and confidence
- Creates strength

Inversions may:

- Help to strengthen the diaphragm and improve breathing
- Improve lymph drainage
- Help circulation; improving blood flow back to the heart
- Support the functioning of the thyroid gland and pineal gland
- Lower stress hormones
- Increase blood flow to the brain (a yoga myth?)

General Principles in Inversions



- Practice with compassion
- Be aware of your foundations / energy
- Build up gradually – be patient
- Listen to the wisdom of your body

Ahimsa: applying non-harm in asana

The following may require all inversions to be practiced with caution, modification or omission...

- High blood pressure
- Heart or circulatory conditions
- Conditions affecting the brain e.g. stroke, epilepsy, brain injury
- Glaucoma / detached retina
- Pregnancy
- Vertigo / dizziness / conditions affecting balance
- Gastric reflux / Hernia
- Menstruation: opinions differ but consider flow of energy (apana)

Adho Mukha Svanasana

Adho = Down
Mukha = Face
Svan = Dog



Adho Mukha Svanasana

Benefits of Adho Mukha Svanasana:

- Stretches the entire back of the body from soles of feet to hands
- Lengthens and releases tension from the whole spine
- Improves posture
- Promotes stability and mobility of the shoulders
- Develops strength & flexibility
- Can be used to rest or energise
- Great for neutralising the spine after twists, side bends or backbends

Specific Cautions:

- Wrists, elbows, shoulders
- Hamstring injury
- One legged-dog/dog with a twist: Sacro-iliac (SI) joint issues

Adho Mukha Svanasana: When Practicing-

- The hands are important (a “second pair of feet”)
- Create a balance of lift (upper body) and release (lower body)
- Continuous flow/line of energy – hands to feet
- A “knowing contact” of the hands with the floor (Peter Blackaby)
- Draw energy upwards from the centre of the palms (hasta bandha)
- Arms providing support and upward lift rather than pushing down into them
- Neck relaxed yet aligned: do you bring tension into the neck as you lift?
- Alignment through upper body is more important than straightening the legs or heels to the floor
- Avoid excessive hyperextension of the elbows: micro-bend
- Shoulders & neck – feel spacious. Arms can be wider if shoulders are tight

Adho Mukha Svanasana: Variations

Variations:

- Swan / extended child
- Puppy dog (Uttana Shishosana)
- Props: chair, wall, wrist/heel wedge
- One-legged dog (Eka Pada Adho Mukha Svanasana)
- Incorporate a twist

Alternatives:

- Dandasana (Staff Pose) with raised arms
- Navasana (Boat Pose)
- Dolphin (avoids weight on wrists)
- Thread the Needle (an alternative for dog with a twist)

Can you think of any others?

Dog: Preparing & Counterpose

Preparing the body:

- Warm & energise the legs
- Release hamstrings
- Awareness of foundations
- Warm up the ankles & wrists
- Warm up & release shoulders
- Lengthen the spine (axial extension)
- Stabilise core, hip flexors, quads

Counterposes:

- Dynamic all fours to swan
- Swan / extended child
- Child
- Tadasana
- Dwi Pada Pitham (Bridge)



Alignment

What potential issues might there be in these examples of Adho Mukha Svanasana

Salamba Sarvangasana

Supported shoulderstand

Salamba = Supported

Sarva = Whole

Anga = Limb or body



Sarvangasana

Benefits of Shoulderstand (and its variations):

- Soothing and calming
- Alleviates fatigue
- Relieves swelling in the legs, ankles and feet
- A great antidote to being on your feet all day
- Develops interoceptive awareness – draws the senses inwards
- Being fully present
- Many wonderful options and variations

Sarvangasana & your neck

- Everyday life requires the ability to flex the head and neck about 23 °
- The average range of flexion for the neck is 45-60 °
- Sarvangasana requires 90 ° flexion
- The neck was designed to support the weight of the head, not the whole body
- Risk of nerve damage – brachial plexus
- Use blanket to:
 - respect the natural curves of the neck
 - avoid the weight of the body descending onto the neck

The Brachial Plexus

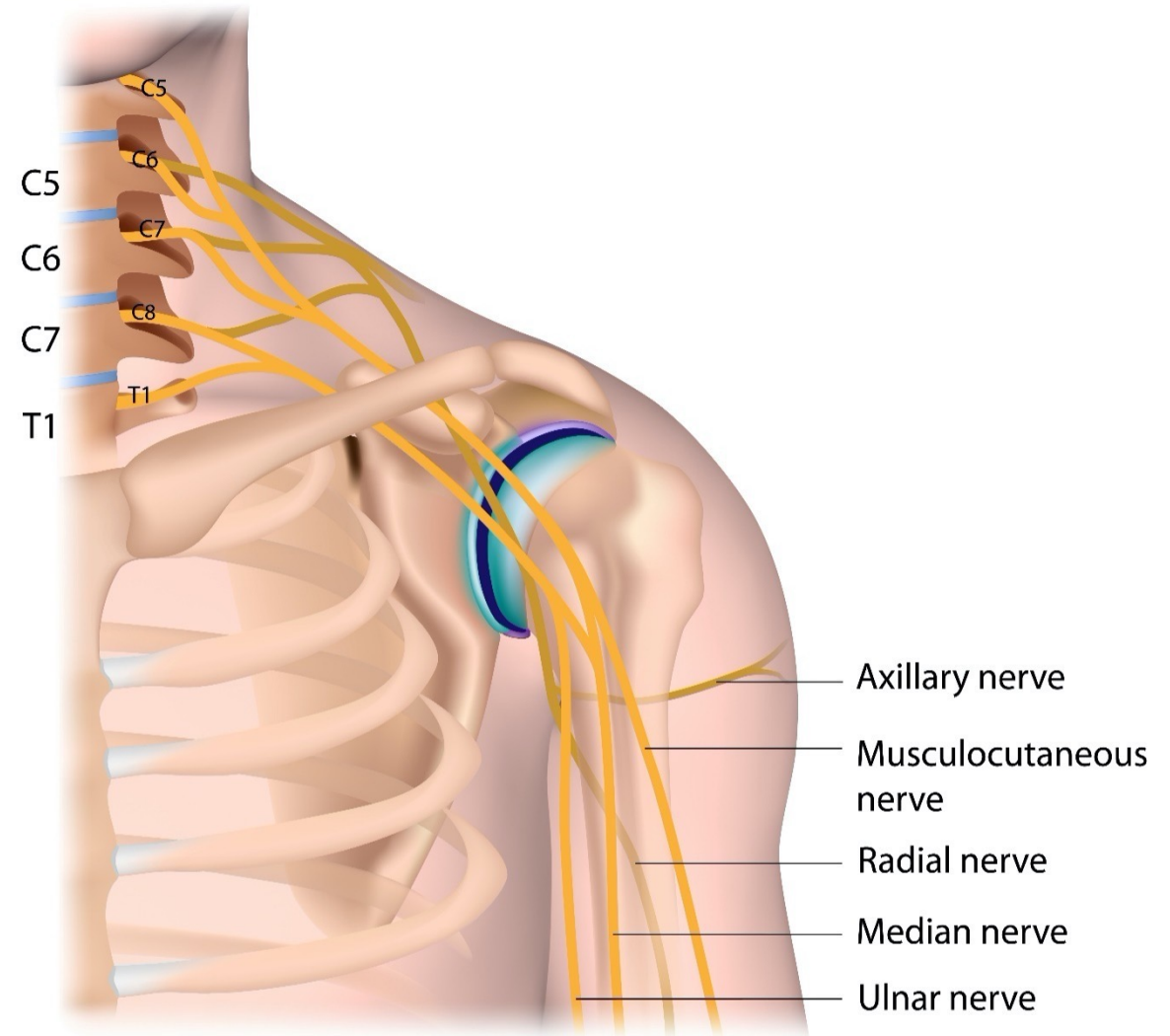


Image Credit: Christopher Reeve Foundation

Sarvangasana: When practicing...

- Do not turn the head
- Always use blankets to reduce the degree of flexion in the neck – the neck should not press into the floor
- The weight of the body is supported by shoulders, upper arms and elbows
- Move slowly and with awareness
- Striha / sukham: balance effort with ease – no force
- The breath should be able to flow freely and smoothly
- Check that the elbows remain on floor (they will lift if the chest muscles are tight)
- Bring elbows close towards the body
- Keep neck and throat relaxed
- Practice once your flexibility and strength are ready – be guided by the wisdom of your heart and your body

Sarvangasana: Variations

Variations and alternatives:

- Vipariti Karani (Legs up the Wall – or chair)
- Ardha Sarvangasana (Half Shoulder Stand)
- Padma Sarvangasana (Lotus Shoulder Stand)

Specific Cautions:

- Neck injury
- Spinal injury or condition affecting the spine
- Shoulder injury
- Radiating pain/tingling along the arms
- Osteoporosis
- Age is a consideration



Sarvangasana: Applying the Sutras to your Practice

- Viveka: discriminative discernment – the ability to choose wisely
“By embracing the eight faceted path, intuitive wisdom dawns and reveals our inner radiance” Sutra 2.28 - Nischala Joy Devi
- Vairagya: non-attachment
- Applying the yama and niyama: how can these help?
- Sutra 2.16 Future suffering is to be avoided

Shoulder Stand: Preparing & Counterpose

Preparing the body:

- Release neck and shoulders
- Expansion across the chest
- Energise the core
- Strengthen back muscles
- Lengthen the spine
- Warm the entire spine i.e. full range of movement

Counterposes:

- Savasana
- Gentle backbend e.g. cobra
- NB: Fish (matsyasana) was often used as a counterpose, but is now generally not recommended
- Remember, a counterpose should be more subtle than the main pose.

*“In inversions, we put our heart above our head.
Can you imagine how our lives, how the world,
would change if we all put our hearts above our heads
more often?”
Miriam Austin*

Sources of inspiration:

- Judith Hanson Lasater
- Donna Farhi
- Peter Blackaby
- Bernie Clark

Images (where not already specified):

Canva