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Standing on Your Own Two Hands

Balancing upside down doesn't have to be intimidating if you practice the steps that lead to a strong and supple handstand.

By Linda Sparrowe

When I was first learning to do Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand) years ago, my kind but honest teacher observed, "You don't really want to get up there very badly, do you?" She couldn't help but notice that my baby kicks propelled my feet barely a foot off the ground. Once she helped me into the pose, I discovered I actually didn't mind being up there; in fact, I really liked building my strength and learning to balance lightly in a new relationship with gravity. But I still feared that if I kicked up too high, I'd bang my head against the wall, which I certainly did mind.



Looking around in my yoga classes, I see plenty of other students showing some degree of Handstand-phobia. Excepting the former gymnasts and a minority of athletically gifted daredevils, many of us seem to react with a certain amount of reluctance when a teacher blithely announces, "OK, Handstand, everybody." The same students who spring into standing poses and can't wait to do complicated twists suddenly start fussing with their clothes, retying their hair, or discover an urgent need to run to the bathroom. My friend Margie (I've changed the name to protect her dignity) even confessed to me that she'd walked out of a private lesson when her teacher announced it was time to work on Handstand without the benefit of a supporting wall. "I don't have any problem doing Headstand or even Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance)," she says, "but for some reason the idea of supporting all my weight on my own little hands made me panic."

Handstand is not a particularly difficult pose physically, although it does require a certain level of flexibility and strength. Instead, the real challenge of Handstand for many students is working on the necessary physical skills in a calm, focused manner while confronting the primal human fear of falling. For a beginning inverter the seemingly simple act of kicking the legs up to a supporting wall can be frightening. Even for more advanced Handstanders, going to a next level with the pose—say, leaping up with both legs at once or balancing in the center of the room—presents challenges that call up the fear factor.

If handstand engenders feelings of anxiety in so many people, why bother to learn it at all? According to Amy Cooper, an Iyengar-trained teacher based in Corte Madera,

California, who loves Handstand and has developed workshops to help others master it, the challenges of the pose are precisely what make it so valuable. Since Handstand brings you face to face with your insecurities and fears, it provides a wonderful laboratory where you can observe and work on overcoming all such emotions. Handstand offers a controlled situation in which you can develop self-confidence, courage, and, Cooper emphasizes, a somewhat playful and curious approach to solving challenges. In addition, she says, Handstand increases your understanding and control of your body because it turns your world upside down and requires you to master an unfamiliar relationship with gravity.

According to the teachings of Iyengar Yoga, Handstand also offers a wide range of physical benefits. "Reversing gravity" is believed to give your vital organs a much-needed rest, improve circulation, respiration, along with elimination, and increase concentration and mental clarity. Handstand also provides the bone-strengthening benefits of weight-bearing exercise to the wrists, fingers, elbows, arms, and shoulders, which may help to prevent osteoporosis.

Build Your Foundation

Ok, so now you are convinced that developing a balanced, light, yet powerful Handstand would be a boon to your practice and your life. But how do you move forward with a sensible, practical Handstand program?

Begin by assessing yourself for the physical skills the pose demands. Handstand, as Cooper points out, requires a certain level of flexibility in the wrists, openness in the shoulders, and strength in the arms and core body. Cooper says that a really good indicator for a successful Handstand is the ability to hold Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) for between 30 seconds and one minute "without experiencing any pain in your wrists, elbows, or shoulders." (If you have injuries in any of these joints or experience lingering pain or strain that doesn't respond well to counter stretches under the watchful eyes of a knowledgeable teacher, don't risk additional injury by standing on your hands.)

Another test, says Cooper, is whether you can hold Plank Pose for at least five breaths-10 or 15 is even better, of course-without sagging at the shoulders or hips. Cooper sees Plank as an invaluable preparation for Handstand because it lets you get used to bearing weight through your wrists and elbows, it can help you learn to keep your arms and shoulders buoyant instead of jamming down onto your wrists and upper arm bones, and it teaches you "to work your abdominal muscles against gravity and use your body as an integrated whole."

If tight shoulders make it hard for you to stay in Downward Dog for very long, Cooper suggests you practice a number of shoulder-opening poses. Ardha Adho Mukha Svanasana (Half Downward-Facing Dog Pose) —standing with your legs perpendicular to the floor and bending forward to place your hands on a wall a little above hip height —is one of her favorites. Bending and straightening your elbows not only helps you find just where the tight spots are in your shoulders, it also helps you

discover how actively pushing with your arms and hands can help open those knots. And keeping the spine extended in Half Dog, instead of sagging where it's most flexible, helps you learn to maintain the same integrity in Handstand. The arm positions of Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose) and Garudasana (Eagle Pose) are also good shoulder openers, as is a passive backbend with a rolled blanket on the floor underneath your shoulder blades.

To increase strength in the shoulders, arms, and torso, Cooper suggests not only doing lots of Plank Pose and steadily increasing your time in Downward Dog but also Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose) and a number of basic arm balances. Try sitting cross-legged, pushing into your hands and drawing your knees and feet off the floor to come into Lolasana (Pendant Pose); even if you can't achieve lift-off, you'll build strength. Cooper also strongly recommends Bakasana (Crane Pose), the one-armed balance Vasisthasana (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Vasistha), and Bhujapidasana (Legs-Press-the-Shoulder Pose).

Handstanding Principles

Although a successful Handstand demands some basic strength and openness, Cooper says there's much more to the pose than just powerful arms and strong, flexible wrists and shoulders. She offers four interrelated principles you can use to work on your Handstand no matter where you are in the development of your pose. Three of these are physical: "Pushing and Yielding," "Whole-Body Integration," and "Engaging Your Core." The fourth, "Playful Curiosity," threads its way through the practice and keeps everything in perspective.

Playful Curiosity. Handstand, like all balancing poses, requires that you feel comfortable with instability. When faced with instability of any kind —physical or mental —most of us tend to recoil immediately and try to regain control by locking things tightly in place. Ironically, this reaction only serves to make us more rigid and less able to make minute and sensitive adjustments to bring ourselves back into balance. Instead, Cooper encourages her students to bring a childlike enthusiasm to their Handstand explorations, focusing on the process rather than the outcome.

Push and Yield. You can think of "Push and Yield" as a physical expression of playful curiosity. In any pose, but especially in balances like Handstand, you should aim not for rigid alignment but for a sense of buoyancy. As you practice, think of a bouncy rubber ball: Even as you allow the parts of your body that touch the floor to ground down, you should also create an upward rebound, a quality of lightness and springiness in your joints.

At first, this buoyancy can feel less stable than a "harder" approach, especially in balancing poses, so Cooper suggests you become comfortable with it in standing poses rather than in more challenging arm balances. Practice Vrksasana (Tree Pose) and let yourself wobble around your center of balance. See how it feels to lose your balance and regain it again without falling over. Or let yourself fall over —that's OK too. Bend your front knee in Trikonasana (Triangle Pose), feeling the springiness in your leg, and

try to maintain that buoyancy even as you straighten the leg into Ardha Chandrasanana (Half Moon Pose).

You can experiment with this buoyant quality in Half Dog at the wall or in full Downward Dog. Bend and straighten your elbows; push down through the balls of your hands and notice the rebounding action up through your body. What should that feel like? Imagine the solidity of bone paired with the cushiony, more resilient quality of muscle: a secure firmness merged with a more fluid I-can-respond-instantly-to-anything feeling. The bones, although securely aligned at the joints, do not feel set in stone. They are ready to move, to adjust at a moment's notice. When you feel prepared, play with kicking a little way up toward Handstand. Don't simply push against gravity; instead of fighting it, dance with it. As you let yourself yield to gravity without collapsing, says Cooper, "You can drop inside and find a balanced energy flow that supports the posture."

Whole-Body Integration. In an integrated Handstand, according to Cooper, your energy needs to flow freely from your heart center down into your hands and up through your belly, legs, and feet. For this to happen you can't let any part of the body collapse or become rigid; with proper alignment you should be able to feel any adjustment you make reverberate through your whole body. As you press into your hands in Handstand, the rib cage needs to lift away from your arms. Your outer shoulder blades, says Cooper, "move in the direction of the arms, and the inner borders of the shoulder blades move in the direction of the legs"; this allows the spine to lengthen and keeps the joints of the upper body from compressing. The lower ribs will tend to jut forward and toward the floor; instead, they need to soften toward the back body as you lengthen your tailbone up and bring your belly in toward your spine. A great way to get a sense of proper Handstand alignment is to first explore it rightside up in Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute), a simple standing pose closely related to Handstand.

Engaging Core Strength. The actions needed to integrate the body in Handstand demand that you draw on your core strength. When most yoga practitioners hear "core strength," they think of using their abdominal muscles to move the navel in toward the spine. But that's only part of the equation, says Cooper. "Core strength comes from continuity between the navel, spine, pelvic floor, and inner legs; in standing poses, for instance, you must wake up the lower half of your body in order to lengthen the upper body."

Cooper suggests you develop this core engagement rightside up before applying it in inversions. To understand how the inner thighs help create core support, she says, stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) with a block between your legs, squeezing it and simultaneously rotating the inner thighs back as if to squirt the block out behind you. Move from this pose into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), maintaining that core support as you change positions. Cooper also suggests using a block like this in Plank Pose and the one-armed balance Vasisthasana.

Put It All Together

Now that you've explored these principles with your feet on the ground, it's time to apply

them in positions that move ever closer to Handstand. A great way to begin is by working with a partner in Ardha Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Half Handstand). "You can still get the sense of how it feels to go upside down," says Cooper, " but you don't have to do it all by yourself." In this pose you begin with your hands a leg-length from a wall, fingers pointing to the center of the room. As you begin to walk your feet up the wall, have your partner press the ball of her foot up against the upper edge of your shoulder blade (the part closest to your head). This helps take pressure off your arms, making it easier for you to lift your weight and open your shoulders. It also lends safety and confidence to your practice: With your partner's help you don't need to worry that your tight shoulders or weak arms will make you catapult forward onto your face.

By working with variations of Half Handstand, you can focus on particular actions you will eventually need in full Handstand. Working with a block between your upper thighs, for example, can help activate your core strength. Extending one leg up toward the ceiling can help you apply the extension, alignment, and integration you previously explored in Urdhva Hastasana.

Next, do Downward Dog with your fingertips just a few inches away from the wall. Walk your legs closer to your hands, raising your hips as high as you can and again exploring the buoyancy of "push and yield" as you prepare to kick up into Handstand. Practice kicking up part way, maintaining a sense of springiness in your hands, arms, and shoulders. If you think you won't make it to vertical under your own steam, have your partner stand at the wall on the side away from your kicking leg, hands on your hips to help you lift up.

The Power of Imagination

If you're relatively new to Handstand or not quite comfortable with the pose, there's a chance you will stall at this point. You may still be reluctant —maybe your heart is even pounding a little —at the thought of kicking up. You may get the sense that your inner critic is sabotaging you. It doesn't seem fair: You've done your physical preparation, and intellectually you know you can do this. Now how can you convince your psyche?

Visualize, says Cooper. Visualization allows you to bring your determination and anxiety together in a productive dialogue. Cooper suggests you do your visualization in constructive rest position, lying on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Take several minutes to breathe into the pose, creating a state in which you feel safe, comfortable, and very relaxed. Release any tension you feel in your body, any stress you detect in your mind. Allow the earth to cradle you; let your back body support your front body. From this position of safety and comfort, picture yourself going through every step of Handstand. The more completely you can visualize it, the more successful you will be.

If you have trouble kicking up at the wall, begin by visualizing all your preparations, and then zoom in on your kick. Which foot do you start with? Can you bring a childlike quality of enthusiasm to that kick? At first don't go beyond that moment; just watch yourself playfully kicking your feet up toward the wall. What happens to your head when

you kick up? Does it lift? If so, visualize your head dropping down between your hands instead. Feel how that changes your energy. A raised head can give the body that "startled baby" feeling, Cooper says, activating the sympathetic nervous system and its fight-or-flight response. Dropping the head calms your energy and brings a sense of ease. In your imagination feel the difference between raising your head and dropping it.

During your visualization picture more than just the physical elements of the pose. Pay attention to how each step makes you feel. If you notice your awareness drifting, try to notice exactly when you check out and gently bring yourself back and start again. If you feel a visceral or emotional reaction during any part of the process, stop and take note, calm yourself, and begin again. If fear arises, try moving into it with a certain level of curiosity. By shifting your attention from fear to curiosity over and over again, you develop insight into the fear, and it tends to dissipate. Ask yourself: Is the fear based on reality? If so, you can use your physical practice to gradually eliminate the grounds for these legitimate fears. If not, continue to explore your fears with an open, compassionate awareness until you can visualize yourself Handstanding with a sense of calm pleasure.

Troubleshooting Tips

If you can visualize yourself kicking up but it still doesn't happen in real time, what should you do? Focusing on your breath can give you a boost. According to Cooper, your breathing as you practice Handstand should be calm and steady. Some people benefit from using a soft Ujjayi Breath (Victorious Breath). Emphasizing exhalation soothes the nervous system, which helps ease fear. Cooper points out that coming up into the pose on an exhalation allows the head to drop more, which further supports relaxation.

If you're still having a hard time, says Cooper, try bringing your hands a little closer to the wall and slightly widening your hand stance. If your shoulders tend to collapse toward the wall and you fear you'll bang your head when you kick up, place a bolster vertically up the wall. If your head does hit the bolster, there's no harm done. In addition the bolster can help support you and stabilize your shoulders, and pressing your head lightly back into the bolster can help you lift even more. You can also stabilize your shoulders by placing a yoga strap at the top of your forearms and pressing them outward without bending your elbows.

As you become more solid and confident in Half Handstand and partner-assisted Handstand at the wall, work on balancing with just the wall as your prop, drawing first one leg and then the other to vertical. Feel comfortable there? Graduate yourself to the middle of the room. You may want to return to partner work and visualization first, especially if you are afraid of kicking past vertical and falling onto your back. A partner can stand ready to catch and steady your hips or even just your legs, which may be all the confidence boost you need. And if you feel ready to go it alone, visualizing your escape routes for falling out of the pose can help augment what Cooper calls the body's "natural coordination and self-preservation." If you have flexible shoulders, you may

imagine yourself dropping back into Urdhva Dhanurasana. If that seems beyond your capabilities, visualize pivoting your hips and doing a mini-cartwheel once you go too far past your balance point. Other practical steps like practicing on a beach, on a soft grassy bank, or with a foam pad behind you can also reduce both fear and risk; Cooper says she taught herself to do Handstand by practicing over and over at the foot of her bed, where any falls would be short and end with a soft landing.

When all the pieces come together, whether you have a partner helping you at the wall or you soar to great heights all alone in the center of the room, a well-integrated Handstand brings a sense of effortlessness, of exquisite balance. Balance, after all, is the place of all possibilities, the place where you're poised and able to move in any direction. You no longer feel fearful, grasping from the outer body to hold to your equilibrium. You can allow the inner body to expand and shift, making minute adjustments to keep yourself centered. At first your Handstand may only bring you glimpses of that spaciousness, that sense of balancing between grounding and rising, holding on and letting go. But that glimpse is a grand beginning. In fact, it's a great way to approach not only Handstand but any challenge in your life that brings you face to face with your insecurities. Knowing that you can literally and figuratively turn your fears upside down can be liberating indeed.

Linda Sparrowe, former managing editor and a current contributing editor at Yoga Journal, is author of *A Woman's Book of Yoga and Health: A Lifelong Guide to Wellness* (Shambhala Publications, 2002) and *Yoga: A Yoga Journal Book* (Hugh Lauter Levin Associates). She directs the new Mind-Body Center at the San Francisco Bay Club. Amy Cooper has been a Bay Area yoga teacher for 22 years; for more information, visit www.shastayogacenter.com.

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