



energetic flow in the body, it is best to do inversions toward the end of practice when alignment has improved and physiological functions are more balanced.

The following classical finishing sequence can easily be modified to accommodate various levels of proficiency, though beginners will want to proceed with caution. Inversions are contraindicated if you are menstruating or suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure, disorders of the eyes or ears, or any other condition that may be aggravated by increased pressure in the head. In addition, *sarvangasana* (shoulderstand), *halasana* (plow pose), and *shirshasana* (headstand) are contraindicated for shoulder and neck injuries, osteoporosis, and obesity. Always practice inversions on an empty stomach.

1. Setu bandhasana (bridge pose)

Setu bandhasana is both a preparation for *sarvangasana* and *halasana*, and a substitution for them when menstruation or any of the contraindications preclude more difficult inversions. The bridge pose helps integrate the energy of the pelvis and legs with the chest, and draws focus to the upper back and throat—the provenance of *udana*.

Lie on your back with your knees bent and the feet parallel on the floor no more than hip-width apart. Keep the ankles directly under the knees, and press the arms into the floor alongside the body. As you inhale, press into the feet and peel the spine off the floor, starting with the

pelvis and rolling slowly up to the tops of the shoulders. Roll the inner thighs strongly down as you press the sacrum up into the body; do not allow the knees to splay out to the sides. To work the arms inward and underneath the body, shift slightly to one side and draw the opposite shoulder and arm in; do the same on the other side. You may be able to interlace the fingers as you press your arms into the floor to lift the sternum toward the chin. In this position, the weight of the body should rest on the outer edges of the shoulders, not the base of the neck. (Note: If you are experiencing pressure on the neck, it's a good indication that you'll need props to practice other inversions, such as the shoulderstand.)

Relax the throat, jaw, and face, while keeping the pelvis, legs, and arms engaged. Stay in the pose for one to three minutes, feeling the energy focused in the upper chest and throat. To come out of the pose, release the arms, and on an exhalation begin to slowly roll the spine to the floor from the neck to the pelvis.

2. Viparita karani (inverted action pose)

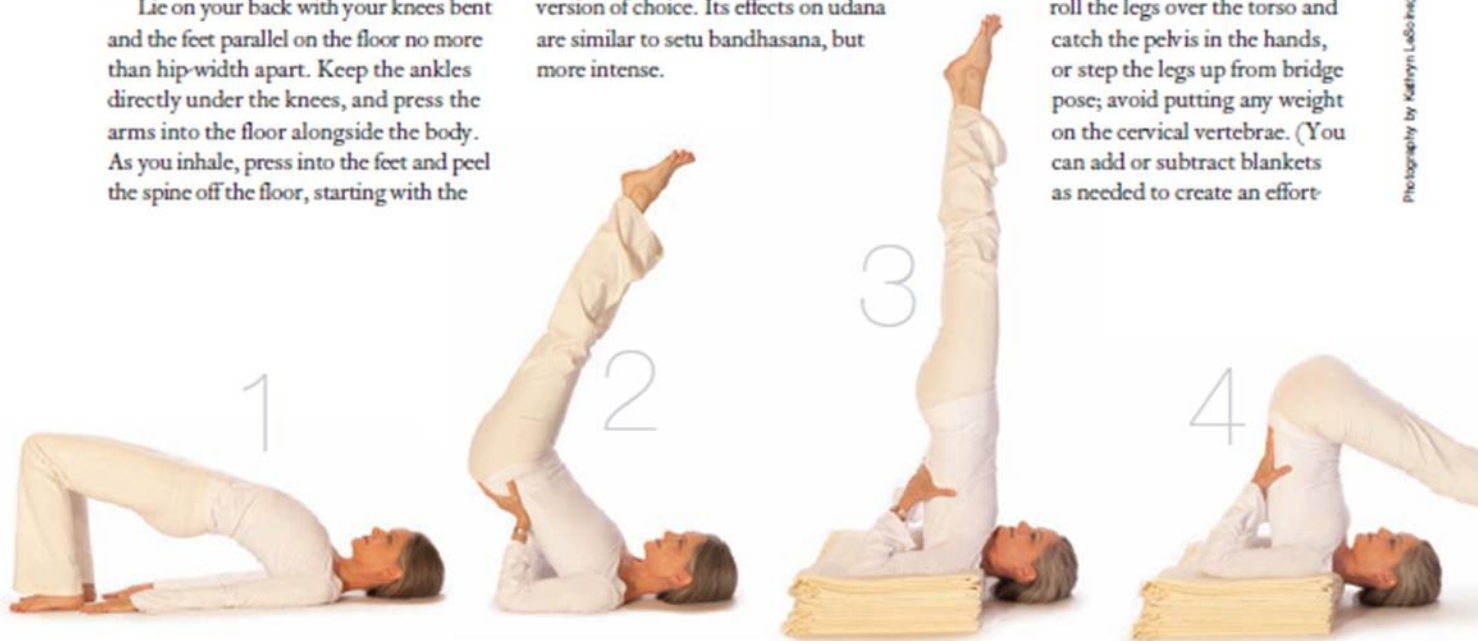
For those who can't do advanced postures like *sarvangasana*, *halasana*, or *shirshasana*, *viparita karani* is the inversion of choice. Its effects on *udana* are similar to *setu bandhasana*, but more intense.

Begin in bridge pose. Bend the elbows and support the back of the pelvis with your hands. Extend one leg upward toward the sky, then the other. Angle the legs over the body to rest the pelvis in the hands; the torso will be at about a 45-degree angle relative to the floor. Keep your legs fully extended, relax the torso, and notice the natural gathering of energy in the throat, upper chest, and head. Hold the pose for one to three minutes, maintaining relaxed breathing. To come out, release the hands and roll down, or step your feet down one at a time to bridge pose, then release the hands and roll the spine down to the floor. (For a popular restorative version of this pose, rest the legs up the wall and the pelvis on a bolster.)

3. Sarvangasana (shoulderstand)

Sarvangasana turns the normal flow of energy in the gravitational field upside down and directs it into the throat center, the home of *udana*.

Start with three neatly folded and evenly stacked blankets. Place your shoulders on the blankets so that you can support your entire weight on the tops of the shoulders and allow your head to rest on the floor. Either roll the legs over the torso and catch the pelvis in the hands, or step the legs up from bridge pose; avoid putting any weight on the cervical vertebrae. (You can add or subtract blankets as needed to create an effort-



less lift without putting pressure on the neck). Work the hands up the back toward the neck, drawing the elbows together. Press down strongly through the upper arms and elbows and extend through the legs. Stretch the spine toward the ceiling from the base of the neck. Reach up through the inner edges of the feet as you draw the sacrum into the body. Hold the pose for one to three minutes, keeping your gaze soft and your face relaxed.

4. Halasana (plow pose)

The grounding of the feet overhead in halasana provides an additional foundation from which to direct energy through the backs of the legs and up the back to the neck and head.

From sarvangasana, lower one foot and then the other to the floor directly above the head. If the back is tight, rest the feet on a prop, such as a block or a bolster. As in sarvangasana draw the elbows together and press them down strongly; walk the hands up toward the neck, and extend through the spine as you move the sacrum into the body. Stretch the heels away from the sitting bones. Keep the throat and face soft, and be aware of the smooth flow of the breath. Let your attention rest in the throat and upper chest, pressing the tops of the shoulders into the floor and lengthening the upper spine. To come out of the posture, lift your legs overhead and begin to roll down your spine as you slowly lower your legs to the floor.

Jalandhara Bandha

The classic hatha yoga practice of *jalandhara bandha*, or chin lock, controls the movement of udana by stabilizing the neck, directing prana and mental focus into the energy centers in the brain, and curbing the outward flow of energy through the throat.

You can practice jalandhara bandha on a more physical level in asana, or on a more energetic and mental level during meditation and pranayama. To practice jalandhara bandha on the gross level, begin in a seated posture and press the hands into the thighs to activate the shoulder girdle and stabilize the upper spine. Draw the tops of the shoulders down and the chin in and slightly down toward the hollow of the throat. Avoid dropping the head too far forward—think more about gently compressing the front of the throat.

In meditation and pranayama, jalandhara bandha is much more subtle and does not call attention to the throat or neck, but rather channels prana to deeper levels of awareness. With as little effort as possible, and keeping the neck in neutral alignment, think about drawing the outward-moving energy of the front of the throat back into the center of the neck and up into the cranial cavity.

5. Matsyasana (fish pose)

Matsyasana is a throat-opening counterpose to sarvangasana and halasana. For most of us, it's also an intense opening for the seldom stretched and often stagnant area of the upper chest, including the collarbones and the front of the shoulders.

Lie on your back and place the hands, palms down, under the pelvis to support the sacrum. Press the legs and arms into the floor, rolling the thighs inward as you lift the chest and tilt the head backward, shifting your weight onto the forearms and the top of the head. Draw the shoulder blades in and

down. Fix your gaze at the eyebrow center and breathe freely. Hold for roughly half the time you held sarvangasana and halasana. To release, press down through the forearms strongly and lift the head slightly to bring the chin toward the chest. Lower onto the shoulders and the back of the head, and roll down to rest. Turn the head side to side to release the neck.

6. Shirshasana (headstand)

Balancing on the head focuses attention on the axial alignment of the whole

