

ŚĪRṢĀSANA AS A VIPARĪTA KARANĪ MUDRĀ

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In the scheme of *haṭha yoga* where the harnessing and the channelising of one's life energy is the goal, the *viparīta karanī mudrā* occupies a special place. A person's full potential is realised when this energy moves to the top of the head. There are various techniques that the ancient seers had formalised to remove the obstacles in the path of this energy and to aid its movement. All these techniques culminated in the *viparīta karanī mudrā*, the principle of inversion, one form of which is the *śīrṣāsana*.

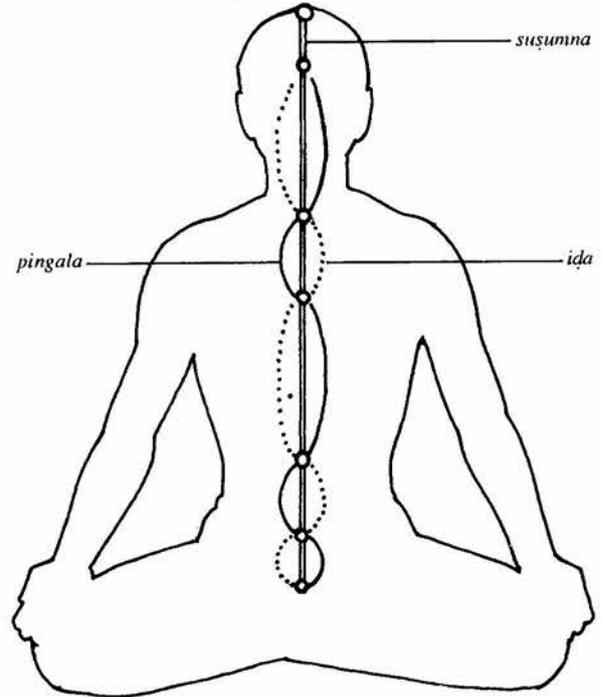
T. K. V. Desikachar explains this concept starting with the most basic requirements of the practice and moving step-by-step through the various techniques, all of which are used in *śīrṣāsana*.

Our ancients understood human life as being governed by *prāṇa*, the force that goes everywhere. They visualised this *prāṇa* flowing in the human body through 72000 *nāḍī*-s.

The *nāḍī*-s are special channels or pathways for the flow of *prāṇa*. Among these 72000 *nāḍī*-s, there are three *nāḍī*-s which are very important. These are the *īḍa*, the *pingala* and the *suṣumna nāḍī*. Reference to these *nāḍī*-s can be found in the Upaniṣad-s, the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*, the *Gherenḍa Samhitā* and the *Yoga Yājñavalkya*.

The *suṣumna nāḍī* forms a straight line running from the base of the spine to the top of the head. The *īḍa* and *pingala nāḍī*-s also begin at the base of the spine but terminate at the point between the eyebrows. As can be seen from the illustration, they begin from either side of the *suṣumna nāḍī* and symmetrically weave their way around it. At the points where these two *nāḍī*-s begin and end and at the points where they cross each other, are situated the *cakra*-s. Starting from the bottom, these six are; *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna*, *maṇipūraka*, *anāhata (hr̥daya)*, *viśuddhi* and *ājñā*. At the very end of the *suṣumna nāḍī*, at the top of the head, is situated the highest and most important *cakra*, the *sahasrāra cakra*.

The *īḍa* and the *pingala* are also known as the 'ha' and 'ṭha' *nāḍī*-s. *Haṭha yoga* is the yoga directed towards the union of the energies of these two *nāḍī*-s in the *suṣumna*. This is as defined in the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*.



The *nāḍī*-s; *īḍa*, *pingala* and *suṣumna* and the position of the seven *cakra*-s

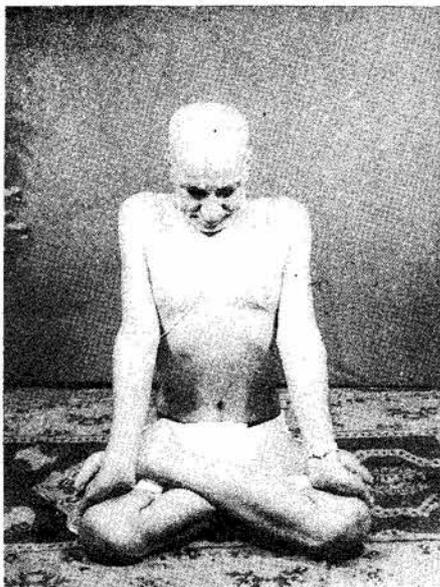
The *prāna* is often dissipated throughout the 72000 *nāḍī*-s due to an improper lifestyle and lack of discipline of body and mind. This leads to an imbalance in the system which could result in illness.

The highest and the ideal situation is where the *prāna* is flowing through the *suṣumna*. Preventing this flow into *suṣumna* is the *kuṇḍalini*. The *kuṇḍalini*, which is the nucleus of the imbalance in the body, sits somewhere between the *mūlādhāra* and the *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*-s blocking the passage of the *prāna* further up the *suṣumna nāḍī*.

When a person gets the *prāna* to enter the *suṣumna*, that person is called a *yogī*. He is in perfect balance and is said to have mastered nature. Through their experience these *yogī*-s evolved three steps in the practice of *haṭha yoga*. These three steps are; *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma* and *mudrā*. The practice of *āsana*-s removes the physical obstacles on the path to this union. Through *prāṇāyāma*, the obstacles in the *nāḍī*-s are removed. This is indicated in the name of the most important *prāṇāyāma*, *nāḍī śuddhi prāṇāyāma*. *Nāḍī śuddhi* means purification of the *nāḍī*-s and especially the purification of the *iḍā* and *pingala*. *Prāṇāyāma* is possible only if the person can sit and breathe deeply for a length of time. *Āsana*-s help prepare a person meet these requirements and are therefore a necessary preliminary practice for *prāṇāyāma*.

Once a person has practised *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* over a length of time he can then begin the third step of *haṭha yoga*, the *mudrā*-s. To understand the significance of *mudrā*-s, one must appreciate the role of exhalation in breathing. Breathing has two parts, inhalation and exhalation. During inhalation the *prāna* is brought towards the *mūlādhāra cakra*. It is on exhalation that the *prāna* is taken up the *suṣumna* towards the *sahasrāra cakra*. The *prāna* must first ascend through the initial six *cakra*-s and only then reach the highest point, the *sahasrāra*. This is why we are instructed, right from the beginning, both in *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, to master the exhalation. Without this our practice is meaningless. T Krishnamacharya, when designing an *āsana* course, would lay great emphasis on postures like *pascimatānāsana*, *mahāmudrā* and *upaviṣṭakoṇāsana*, which aid exhalation. Exhalation is therefore the first step in the attempt to move the *prāna* from the *mūlādhāra* towards the *sahasrāra*.

Another important aspect of the breath is the *kumbhaka balam*, the ability to hold the breath. There are two types of *kumbhaka*-s, *antaḥ kumbhaka* and *bāhya kumbhaka*. *Antaḥ kumbhaka* is the ability to hold the breath after inhalation. *Bāhya kumbhaka* is the ability to hold the breath after exhalation. Though both are important, *bāhya kumbhaka* is the more important of the two. It is *bāhya kumbhaka* which corrects the problems of the *tamo guṇa* which



The front and back view of T. Krishnamacharya performing the *uddyāna bandha mudrā*

through the heaviness of the *apāna*, pulls everything downward. Even the *mūlādhāra cakra* can be pulled down from its normal position. This can result in various illnesses like obesity, hemorrhoids, piles, constipation and prolapsed uterus. When the *mūlādhāra* is pulled down it becomes more difficult for the *prāṇa* to enter the *suṣumna*. Exhalation and the holding of breath after exhalation perform two functions; moving the *prāṇa* from the *mūlādhāra* to the *sahasrāra* as well as moving the *mūlādhāra* itself towards the *sahasrāra*.

To increase the effect of exhalation and the hold after exhalation the ancients introduced certain *mudrā*-s. Chief among these are the *uḍḍiyāna bandha mudrā* and the *mūlādhāra bandha mudrā*. *Uḍḍiyāna* means to lift up. In *uḍḍiyāna bandha*, the person not only exhales and holds the breath after exhale, but also consciously moves the *mūlādhāra* towards the *sahasrāra* by pulling the stomach up. *Mūlādhāra bandha* is the fixing of the *mūlādhāra cakra* at the right position.

With the heaviness of the body removed by *āsana* practice, with the *nāḍī*-s especially the *īḍa* and the *pingala*, cleansed and purified by *nāḍī śuddhi prāṇāyāma*, with the development of the power of exhalation and *bāhya kumbhaka* and with the use of *uḍḍiyāna* and *mūla bandha*, the *prāṇa* is helped in its journey up the *suṣumna nāḍī*.

The ancients also visualised an *agni*, a fire, burning in the region of the stomach. With every inhalation this fire is directed down towards the *apāna*, the accumulated impurities, that lie below the *mūlādhāra*. Through *antaḥ kumbhaka*, the hold of breath after inhalation, the fire that is directed to the *apāna* is retained in that direction for a length of time. It is through *antaḥ kumbhaka* that the *apāna* and slowly the *kuṇḍalini* are eliminated. This is the importance of *antaḥ kumbhaka* in *prāṇāyāma*. *Bāhya kumbhaka* also helps in the elimination of the impurities. When doing *bāhya kumbhaka* with *uḍḍiyāna bandha* the seat of the impurities is brought closer to the fire.

To help in moving the *mūlādhāra* further up towards the *sahasrāra*, the ancient masters took advantage of the natural tendency of the *tamo guṇa*. The *tamo guṇa* is associated with heaviness and always pulls everything downward. In an inverted posture the *tamo guṇa* would, in the exercise of its natural tendency, help bring the *mūlādhāra* closer to the *sahasrāra*. To this end they devised the *viparīta karaṇī mudrā*, a form of which is the *śīrṣāsana*. In this posture one can

perform both *bāhya* and *antaḥ kumbhaka* and can also adopt *uḍḍiyāna* and *mūla bandha* thereby using all the techniques available to achieve the goal. It is for this reason that *śīrṣāsana* is considered the crown of all *āsana*-s.

There is yet another benefit of doing *śīrṣāsana*. The ancients had visualised the existence of an *amṛtam*, life giving nectar, in the region of the *ājñā cakra*. This *amṛtam* is constantly falling, drop by drop, from the head into the fire below and is consumed by it. It is through this process that we age. In *śīrṣāsana* the head is below the rest of the body and so the *amṛtam* is preserved in the *ājñā cakra*. In this way we can, for a short period, arrest the continual downward flow of this precious life-giving nectar.

Finally, there is the nature of fire to always burn upward. When the body is inverted, the fire which originally had the *apāna* below it will now be burning the *apāna*. What was sought to be achieved (the elimination of the *apāna*) through breathing, is now achieved through posture. We therefore see that, when in *śīrṣāsana*, the goal of getting the *prāṇa* into the *suṣumna* is greatly helped by:-

First, the good exhalation possible in this posture through which alone it is possible for the *prāṇa* to move from the *mūlādhāra* to the *sahasrāra cakra*.

Second, the use of *bāhya kumbhaka*, hold of breath after exhalation, which further helps the movement of *prāṇa* from the *mūlādhāra* to the *sahasrāra cakra* and also helps to correctly position the *mūlādhāra cakra* making it easy for the *prāṇa* to enter.

Third, the use of *uḍḍiyāna* and *mūlabandha mudrā*-s which further help the *mūlādhāra cakra* be in the correct position.

Fourth, inhalation and *antaḥ kumbhaka*, hold of breath after inhalation, which draw the fire towards the *apāna* and help eliminate both the impurities and the *kuṇḍalini*.

Fifth, the inversion whereby the *tamo guṇa* is used to draw the *mūlādhāra cakra* towards the *sahasrāra*.

Sixth, the nature of fire to always burn upward and so in an inverted posture it burns the *apāna* which is now right above it.

Śīrṣāsana is not just an *āsana* but a form of the *viparīta karaṇī mudrā* which is considered the most important among the *mudrā*-s. Great though the benefits of this posture are, it must not be

done without adequately preparing the system over a period of time. Even when the system has been prepared and is ready for the posture and even if the person regularly practises *śīrṣāsana*, it must never be done as the first part of the practice. To do otherwise could result in problems.

It is also absolutely essential that the person learns the posture under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

Before doing *śīrṣāsana* one must first take care of the *dhātu-s* (tissues) in the body. *Āsana-s* should be practised which will help the *prāṇa* centre itself in the *iḍa* and the *pingala*. This should be followed by *prāṇāyāma* and then by *bandha-s*. Only then can the *viparīta karaṇī mudrā* be introduced. *Śīrṣāsana* is the highest point of the practice.

It is equally important that the practice should not end with *śīrṣāsana* but should gradually taper down. The ancients had an interesting sequence of practice. In the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* (chapter 2, verse 48) there is quoted an important text called *Kūrma Purāṇa*. In this quotation Śiva describes how *āsana-s* should be practised. The order described is; *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *samkalpa* (visualisation and offering) to *Ādiśeṣa*, *āsana*, *śavāsana* and then the *viparītakaraṇī mudrā*. This is followed by *prāṇāyāma* in *siddhāsana*. The order is significant. The practice did not stop with *śīrṣāsana* but something more was done. The practice was long and done in the *brahma muhūrta*, early morning, all of which is referred to in the *Kūrma Purāṇa*.

Through *śīrṣāsana* the obstacles to the movement of the *prāṇa* into the *suṣumna* are removed. It should be remembered that if the person cannot do proper *prāṇāyāma*, *śīrṣāsana* will not be useful. Another necessary requirement is *sama kāya śarīra*, proper alignment of the body. That is why an *āsana* course contains a range of *āsana-s*, forward bends, twists, backbends, side stretches. All these help keep the spine in its proper axis and precede the initiation into the *viparīta karaṇī mudrā*.

Āsana practice is not just to reduce heaviness but also to properly align the spine and the body. If there is a misalignment in a normal posture this could be aggravated by the practice of *śīrṣāsana*.

According to T. Krishnamacharya, different *āsana-s* bring *caitanya* (consciousness) to different *cakra-s*. When in an *āsana*, the mind focuses on the part most used. In *pascimatānāsana* the focus is on the lower back and so the *mūlādhāra cakra* is influenced. In *sarvāṅgāsana* the focus is the *jālandhara*, the chin and so the *viśuddhi cakra* is influenced. Among *āsana-s*, *śīrṣāsana* is the only one where the focus is in the region of the *sahasrāra cakra*.

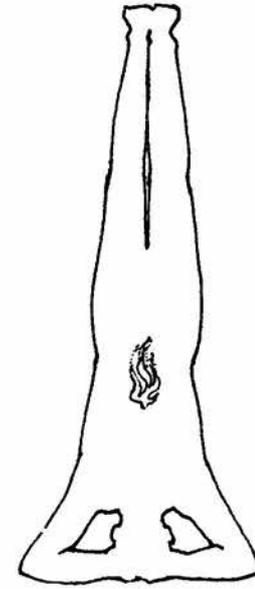
It must be remembered that *śīrṣāsana* is one form of the *viparīta karaṇī mudrā*. For those who cannot do *śīrṣāsana* or any other inverted posture, alternatives do exist. *Mahāmudrā* is one such alternative which would yield similar benefits. More about these can be known from a study of the third chapter of the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*.



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The *agni* i) as it normally is ii) on inhalation and iii) in an inverted posture

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