

basics

dolphin

by Natasha Rizopoulos

Up in Arms

THE ACT OF GOING upside down, whether for a few breaths in a pose like Adho Mukha Vrksasana (Handstand) or for several minutes in a pose like Sirsasana (Headstand), can feel tremendously liberating. Inversions provide myriad physical, mental, and emotional benefits. But they also require strength, flexibility, and confidence about reversing your normal relationship to gravity, and those can take time to develop. If your body or your mind is not yet prepared to do a full inversion, you'll benefit from trying a multifaceted posture called Dolphin.

Dolphin both opens and strengthens the upper body, making it a great preparation for inversions or a nice substitute posture when you're not ready to fly your legs above your head. Whether you practice Dolphin to get comfortable with the idea of turning upside down or you practice it as a prelude to Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance), Dolphin's virtues are numerous. With continued practice, you'll experience greater range of motion in your spine and shoulders and build strength in your arms and core while getting accustomed to the idea of

Prepare for inversions by strengthening your arms and core in Dolphin Pose.



Release heels back and down

Keep feet parallel

Push hips
back and up

Lengthen spine



DON'T Drop toward the floor.



DO Lift your shoulders.

Keep forearms parallel

Root inner hands and
wrists into the floor

Place elbows shoulder-
distance apart

Press down from
palms to elbows



bearing weight on your hands, arms, and upper body. Befriend Dolphin, in other words, and you'll open the door to a world in which the cartwheels of your youth no longer seem like a distant memory.

PRESS DOWN TO LIFT UP

For the first Dolphin variation (see figure 1), use the arm position associated with a classic Headstand, but keep your head off the floor. This will help you stretch and strengthen your shoulders and open your middle and upper back, areas that are chronically tight in many students. Begin kneeling at the center of your mat and interlace your fingers, slipping one pinkie inside the opposite palm so you have a flat surface from your outer hands to your wrists. Place your hands on the floor, with your forearms creating a V shape. Your elbows will be shoulder-distance apart and a couple of inches in front of your shoulders. Keep your inner wrists stacked directly over your outer wrists (so that your hands don't fall open) and press down firmly from your outer hands to your elbows.

Perform a quasi "karate chop" in this position to ensure that you really are making strong contact with the floor—the ability to forcefully root down gives Dolphin its integrity and vitality. Pressing down enables you to lift up. Consider a tennis ball: If you simply drop it, it doesn't bounce very high. If, on the other hand, you throw it down with some force, it bounces up much higher. Actively press

down with your forearms and use this contact to raise your shoulders away from the floor so that they're not dropping toward your ears and creating compression.

Once you've established this connection between the base of the pose and your shoulders, keep gazing back at your feet as you lift up into Dolphin by tucking your toes under and pressing your hips back and up as if you were going into Downward-Facing Dog. Push the floor away with your forearms so that your shoulders and hips extend away from your elbows in a straight line, then straighten your legs and reach your heels toward the floor. Let your head hang freely so there is no tension in your neck, and lengthen the front and back of your torso evenly. If you are flexible, you may find your front ribs poking toward the floor; if they do, try to soften them a bit by moving your lower ribs toward the back body. If you are naturally a bit stiffer (especially in your hamstrings), notice if your spine is rounded and work to lengthen it, slightly bending your knees if necessary. Hold for 10 to 15 breaths and then release your knees to the floor and sit back on your heels.

ENGAGE YOUR CORE

The next variation is a version of Plank Pose that strengthens your shoulders and core (see figure 2). You'll use the same arm position as in the inversion called Pincha Mayurasana. But tight shoulders often make the elbows splay and the hands drift toward each other. Using a block and a

Pose Benefits

- Strengthens arms and shoulders
- Opens shoulders and upper back
- Good alternative to and preparation for inversions

Contraindications

- Shoulder injuries
- Glaucoma
- High blood pressure
- Recent stroke



strap will prevent this and help you find the correct alignment. Take a strap and make a loop in it. Slide the loop just above your elbows and see that it is big enough to keep your elbows shoulder-distance apart when you tighten the strap. Next, take a block and place it on its lowest height at the front of your mat. Create L shapes with each thumb and forefinger and put your hands on either side of the block, so the fingers and thumbs form a frame around the lower corners of the block.

Once you've set up your base, step your feet back so that your body is long and straight like a plank of wood. Your feet should be hip-distance apart with your heels stacked over the balls of your feet. Your shoulders will stack over your elbows when your hips are shoulder height. To engage your core, press your heels back as you extend your sternum forward, and lift the tops of your thighs to the ceiling as you tuck your tailbone. These actions will make you compact at your core, and you'll feel a sense of your lower belly supporting your lower back. Creating integrity in your

inversion 101

So what is an inversion? A dictionary definition of "invert" is to "put upside down or in the opposite position, order, or arrangement."

In yoga, inversions are sometimes broadly defined as positions in which the heart is higher than the head (as in Dolphin or Downward-Facing Dog), and sometimes more narrowly defined as positions in which the feet are higher than the heart (Headstand or Shoulderstand). For simplicity's sake, you can consider poses in the first category as mild inversions and those in the second category as full inversions. Because inversions can increase pressure in the head, they are avoided or approached with caution for students with conditions such as glaucoma or recent stroke. Those with neck injuries may need to skip shoulderstands and headstands. If you have any of these conditions, make sure you practice under the supervision of an experienced teacher. Some teachers also advise against full inversions during menstruation, holding to the belief that

your body deserves rest during your cycle and that menstrual blood flowing upstream into the abdominal cavity could increase risk for endometriosis. (There is debate about this.)

Before embarking on full inversions, you'll want to first develop a combination of strength and flexibility in the upper body, so that you can enjoy being upside down without creating strain or injury. The "mild" inversions serve an important function, as they prepare and train the body so that the "full" inversions can be as beneficial and pleasurable as possible.

Practitioners who spend time upside down report benefits ranging from better sleep, focus, and digestion, to seeing the world from a different perspective. Shifting your body's relationship to gravity may improve various physiological functions, such as lymphatic drainage and the return of blood to the heart.

Tremendous satisfaction also comes from methodically and progressively approaching poses that are challenging and sometimes fear inducing.

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abdomen will benefit all of your postures, especially inversions. Gaze slightly forward and hold for 10 to 15 breaths.

FIND BALANCE TO GET UP

For the final version of Dolphin, take the basic shape and actions from the first variation and combine them with the more challenging arm position from the second. Place your forearms parallel to each other with your wrists and elbows shoulder-distance apart. Tuck your toes under and press your hips up and back.

Notice how it becomes more difficult to keep the elbows from moving apart without help from the block and strap. If you need the props to keep your forearms parallel, use them. When your elbows splay, the heads of your upper arm bones tend to collapse forward, causing congestion around the neck and upper back—both elements you'll want to avoid in Dolphin and other inversions.

Press down from wrist to elbow, so that you can lift your shoulders and hips up and away from the base of the pose. In

particular, root down with your inner hands and wrists, which tend to curl up in this position. As you extend your hips back and up, move your shoulder blades in toward your chest and push your chest toward your thighs—actions that will help to open your upper back and shoulders.

If you're more flexible, however, make sure when you do this that you haven't overstretched the front of your body, causing you to puff your front ribs and armpits toward your legs. Instead, try to lengthen the front and back body equally, softening the front ribs and firming the triceps so you don't sink through your armpits (you'll know you've done this if your ears aren't in line with your upper arms).

Remember the tennis ball analogy: Energetically connect to the floor beneath you and use this contact to ascend your spine and hips toward the ceiling. If you can straighten your legs without rounding

your spine, press your quadriceps back; otherwise, soften your knees so that you can maintain the length in your spine. Let your head hang freely and hold the pose for 10 to 15 breaths.

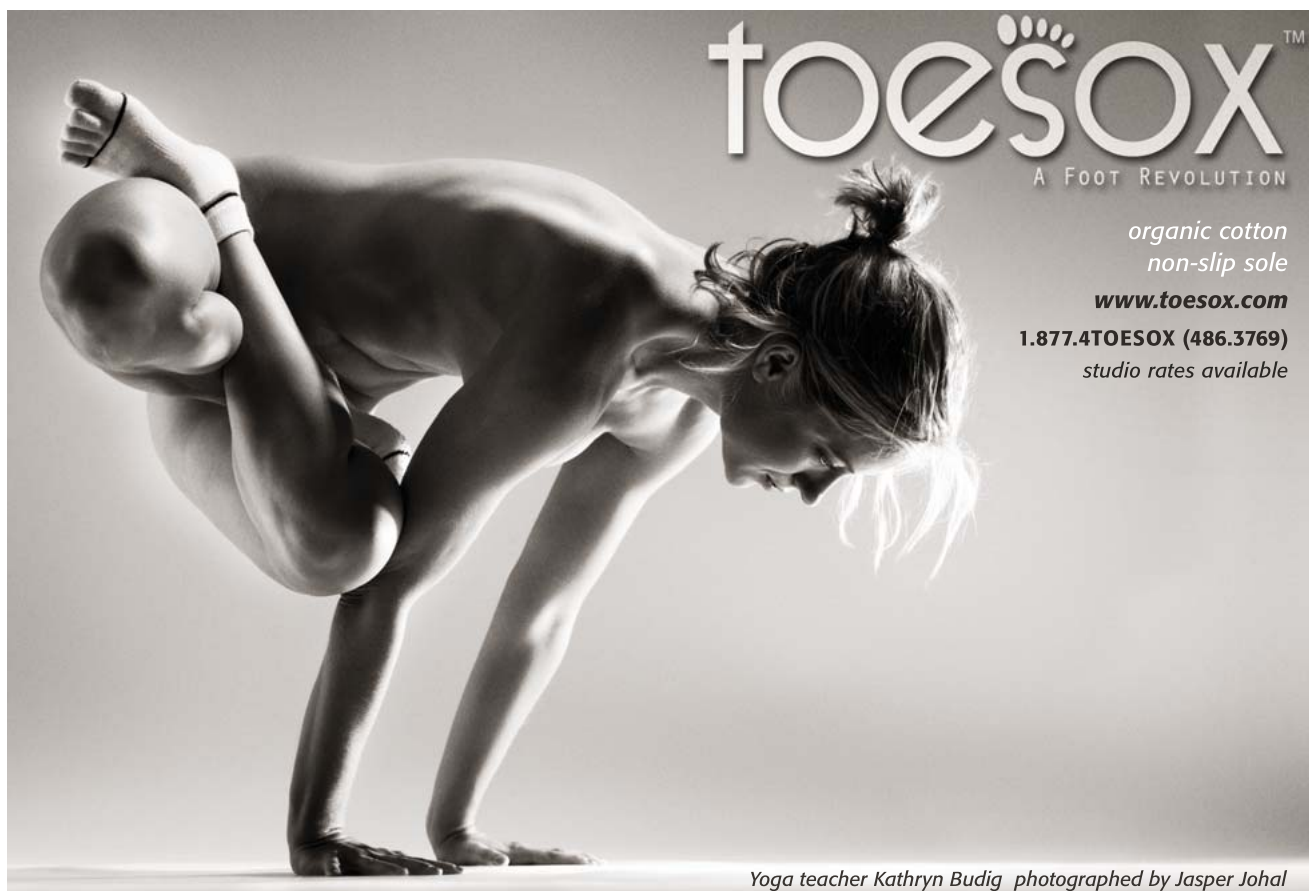
Observe the nice stretch in your shoulders and spine as well as the strength you're using to lift up away from the floor. This is the essence of yoga: a marriage of seeming opposites to create a posture that is both stable and firm as well as spacious and expansive.

In the Yoga Sutra, the sage Patanjali wrote that after experiencing this juxtaposition of steadiness and ease, one is undisturbed by the dualities. Perhaps he was suggesting that you'll find your equilibrium—whether upright or inverted, on the mat or off—when you explore the balance between strength and flexibility. ■

Natasba Rizopoulos lives and teaches yoga in Los Angeles and Boston.

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