

YOGA WEEKLY

News and Stories From The Big City

Headstands Should They Be Taught?

[Glenn Black](#) answers the phone at his home in Rhinebeck, one recent morning.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Never ask me that question," he says only half-joking, with the voice of a man tired of explaining himself to everyone.

Since William Broad's article "[How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body](#)," appeared in the New York Times Magazine earlier this year—a story where Black was quoted saying that "the vast majority of people" should give up yoga asana practice—he's been fielding scathing criticism from yogis around the world.

I'm calling Black to discuss one of his bugaboos, the headstand—a pose many consider one of the king postures of the practice, and one that Black believes ought to be banned from yoga classes altogether. I want to talk to him not only because of his strong opinion on the pose, but also because, years ago, doing one of my first headstands at home, I ended up in the emergency room.

Years after my injury (in which I pulled a muscle in my jaw and crushed the salivary gland in my cheek, swelling my mouth shut), I can't bring myself to teach headstand to my students. But walk into any New York City class and more often than not, you'll meet teachers who have no qualms about adding *sirsasana* to their sequence. Black believes that unless students are individually assessed before coming into the pose—an impossible task in a room full of students—such teachers are acting irresponsibly.

I decided to ask around. How are teachers across disciplines teaching headstand? And what can students less eager to get on the tops of their heads do to get the same benefits?

Not surprisingly, it's hard to find a consensus, particularly when it comes to *sirsasana*. Even at what point in the practice it should be done is disputed. Ashtangis, for example, believe headstand should always follow shoulder stand because it's more quieting, whereas Iyengars insist it should come first because it's more heating.

Sequencing aside, the question of who should be doing headstand in the first place is critical. [Erica Mather](#), who teaches at [Pure](#) believes few people have built the strength in their cervical spine and upper body to properly come into the pose. Like Black, Mather does not teach

headstand at all unless students specifically request it, which happens about once a year.

Following [Ana Forrest's](#) teachings, Mather believes we carry most of our tension in our necks and that it's more important to work on stretching and learning to relax the neck than bear weight on it. "Most people don't possess the upper body strength in order to do [headstand]," she says. "They squash their necks and end up hurting themselves."

One look at people's posture can often be enough of an indication as to whether they are ready to come into the pose, says [Paula Lynch Liberis](#), who teaches at [YogaWorks](#). Most people hold their head out in front of their necks with their chins lifted, shortening their posterior neck muscles, which doesn't allow for proper alignment of the cervical spine. "If you can't hold your head on top of your spine effectively and sustain it for eight hours or more a day, then I'm not going to teach you to put the entire weight of your body on your head and neck," she says.

Liberis teaches headstand infrequently and is more interested in teaching students how to prepare for the pose. She holds a block against the wall and has students walk toward it in dolphin pose, pressing the block between their shoulder blades to teach them to use their forearms and engage the back when coming into the inversion. Only when students are able to keep the block up against the wall on their own, does she have them try the pose with their heads on the floor.

While most teachers use the wall as a teaching tool for headstand, others intentionally keep students away from it. [Jason Brown](#), founder of [Zenyasa Yoga](#), believes students often use the wall as a crutch with the misconception that it's safer. Over the years, he's seen people at the wall fall sideways, hurting themselves or students beside them. Instead, Brown teaches the pose in the center of the room, breaking it down into four different stages that students approach as they are ready. "There's much less aggression because there's a little bit more fear that you will fall," he says.

Following the Iyengar method, [Nancy Preston](#), who teaches at [Bread and Yoga](#), [Mind Body Soul](#) and [Yoga For Bliss](#), does not teach students headstand until they first master shoulder stand. To test whether students are ready to go into the pose, she has them first come into a half *sirsasana* with their forearms on the floor. Students whose spine begins to round as they walk forward are not yet ready to come into the inversion, she says. Preston will have such students work the halfway position with their feet on the floor, encouraging them to press firmly into their forearms removing some of the weight from their neck. "The bones of the cervical spine are the smallest vertebrae that we have," she says. "They are not meant to weight-bear. You have to use the rest of the body to take the weight off."

But while some teachers discourage pressing the head down in *sirsasana*, [Alison West](#) of [Yoga Union](#) teaches otherwise. "The pose is called headstand, not forearm stand. If you press the head down strongly along with the arms, the neck will actually lengthen," she says.

West has at least fourteen variations of headstand that she uses with students depending on their needs. In one preparation, she has student lie on their backs, knees bent, with their heads against a foam block pressing into the wall to help them understand the sensation of bearing weight on the head without actually coming into the inversion. She sometimes also has students press a

block into the tops of their heads while standing for a similar effect.

Regardless of differing opinions about the distribution of weight on the head, there seems to be a consensus that doing upper bodywork is critical for anyone going into headstand, including poses like dolphin in which the forearms are on the floor. In addition to building strength in the shoulder girdle, learning to decompress the spine is also critical before anyone should consider bearing weight on the head, says Black. "We are erect bipedal creatures...constantly fighting gravity. Nature gave us muscles that...decompress the spine," he says. "When you do inversions, unless you know how to engage those muscles, you are going to compress the spine." Black has students stand behind each other and literally lift each other's heads by the occipital ridge and temples to show them what it feels like to lengthen their necks.

For those avoiding headstand altogether, alternative postures can provide some of the same benefits. Black recommends forward folds like *prasarita padottanasana* and Preston uses blocks under students' shoulders to take some of the weight off their heads. Liberis has students go into downward dog with their heads resting on a block as another gentle inversion alternative. *Viparita karani*, a half shoulder stand with a block supporting the sacrum is another pose Black incorporates in his classes to get the venous blood flowing into the upper body. "You don't have to go up into a full headstand," he says, "to get the same effects."

If only I'd known this years ago before flinging my legs up into the headstand that sent me to the hospital. "Isn't yoga supposed to be therapeutic and relaxing?" the intern who stood over me in the examining chair at the ER asked. I didn't have much of a response at the time—and not just because my mouth was swollen shut. Like most yoga students, I had been eager to get into the pose, thinking my inability to do so was a sign that I was not yet advanced. But years of practice, of course, have taught me that advanced yogis aren't the students who can do the most challenging poses at all costs - it's the ones who listen to and honor what their bodies need.

While you might be hard-pressed to find a room full of yoga teachers with the same opinion about how and why to do headstand, what's certain is that if you're in a class where the instructor tells everyone just to pop into *sirsasana*, chances are it's not you who has a thing or two to learn about the pose—it's your teacher.

--Jane Porter

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