

Viparita Karani

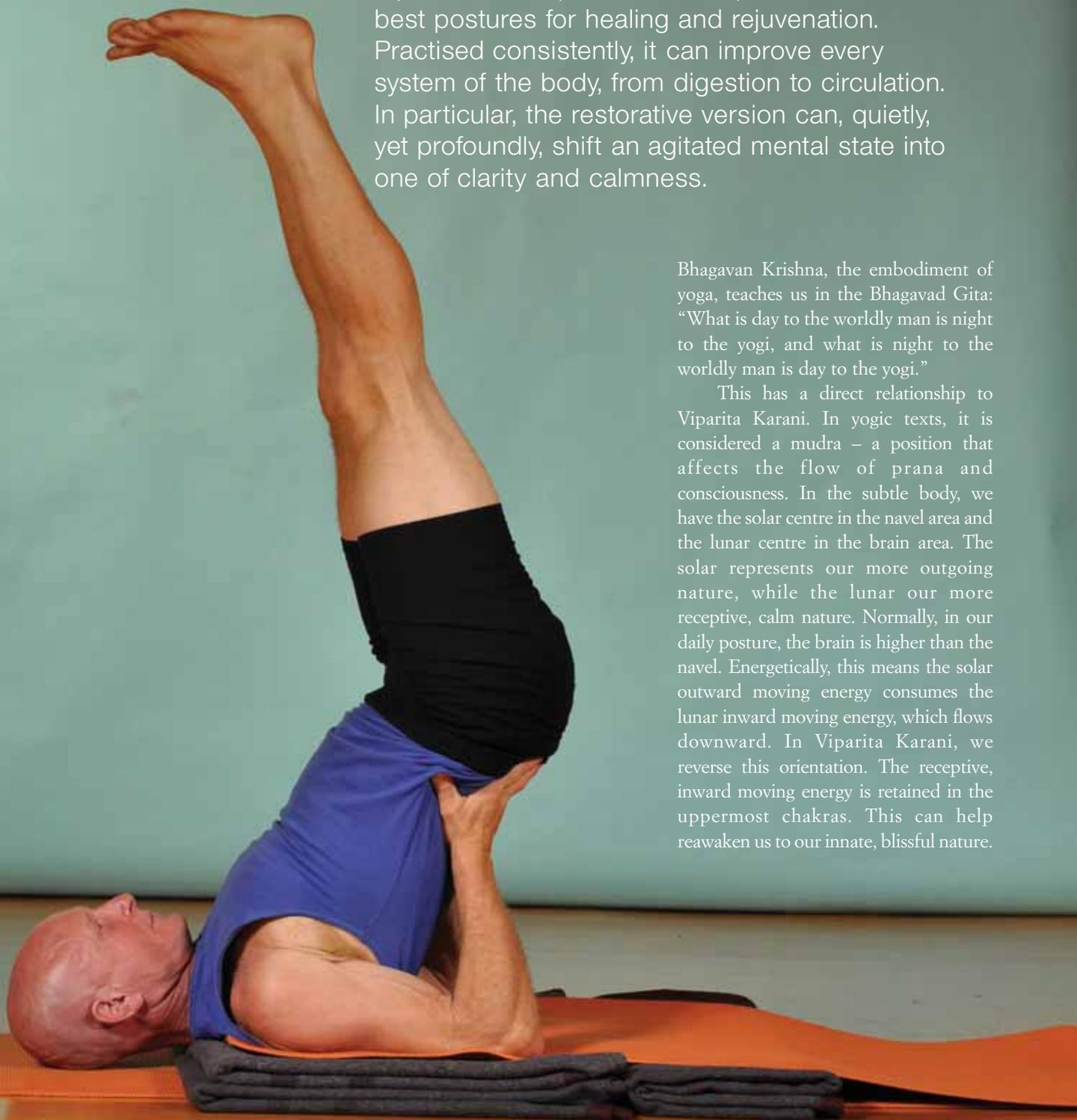
Inverted Action

by Adam Bornstein

Viparita Karani (Inverted action) is one of the best postures for healing and rejuvenation. Practised consistently, it can improve every system of the body, from digestion to circulation. In particular, the restorative version can, quietly, yet profoundly, shift an agitated mental state into one of clarity and calmness.

Bhagavan Krishna, the embodiment of yoga, teaches us in the Bhagavad Gita: "What is day to the worldly man is night to the yogi, and what is night to the worldly man is day to the yogi."

This has a direct relationship to Viparita Karani. In yogic texts, it is considered a mudra – a position that affects the flow of prana and consciousness. In the subtle body, we have the solar centre in the navel area and the lunar centre in the brain area. The solar represents our more outgoing nature, while the lunar our more receptive, calm nature. Normally, in our daily posture, the brain is higher than the navel. Energetically, this means the solar outward moving energy consumes the lunar inward moving energy, which flows downward. In Viparita Karani, we reverse this orientation. The receptive, inward moving energy is retained in the uppermost chakras. This can help reawaken us to our innate, blissful nature.



A. Healing and rejuvenating variation

This Legs Up the Wall version of Viparita Karani serves to quietly rejuvenate all the systems of the body. Be sure to set aside at least six minutes to gain the benefits.



Props

You will need a wall, a bolster, a yoga strap with a buckle, and a blanket or two. An eye pillow or scarf will also be helpful.

Getting into the pose

Place the blanket on the floor, touching the wall. Position the bolster approximately 10 cm from the wall as shown in the image above. Sit sideways on the short end of the bolster and as you lean back with the support of your hands, swing the legs up the wall. Lie back with the lumbar (lower) spine on the bolster and the thoracic (middle) spine gently draping over the edge. The shoulders and back of head are on the floor. Bend the knees to the chest and place the strap, formed into a loop, over the feet and onto the thighs as shown. Bring the heels to the wall with the legs straight. The sacrum at the back of the pelvis smoothly eases over the edge of the bolster that runs parallel with the wall. Open the arms to the sides. Experiment as to your arm and hand position to find the most relaxing placement. If you are chilly, place a blanket over the feet, legs, and torso. The eye pillow will help to internalise the mind.

Being in the pose

Close the eyes and make any last adjustments to be as easeful as possible. If the knees start to ache, bring the pelvis closer to the wall or place a second bolster vertically between the wall and the back of the legs. With a long exhalation, surrender the body into the support of wall, bolster, and floor. Feel each successive exhalation, melt the body deeper and deeper. Feel all five senses reverse their outward flow as your energy and consciousness turn within. Let go of any effort and simply be there, in the calm stillness. If the mind is busy, don't fight it, just steer your attention to the gentle breath moving in and out, like waves rising and falling. Go deep into the moments of pure relaxed awareness – the calm ocean behind any thought waves.

Transitioning out of the pose

Bend the knees and slide the feet down the wall. Take off the strap and roll over to one side. Slowly press up to a sitting position and sit still for a few moments enjoying the after-effects.

Benefits

Circulation

The upside down position helps to reduce water retention in the legs and assists with the venous blood return to the heart. When held for a few minutes, the pressure in the anterior throat can signal the nervous system (through a sensor in the carotid arteries) to reduce the blood pressure, leading to calmness in body and mind.

Digestion

Compression in the abdomen is relieved. This can help the organs shift into their proper places and improve assimilation, digestion, and elimination.

Nervous system

Nervous stress dissolves through consistent practise of this pose. A relaxation response (parasympathetic) is carried through the body/mind as we slow down and 'be' in the pose.

Endocrine system

The glands, especially the ones in the throat, (the thyroid and parathyroid), can be beneficially influenced to balance their hormonal secretions.

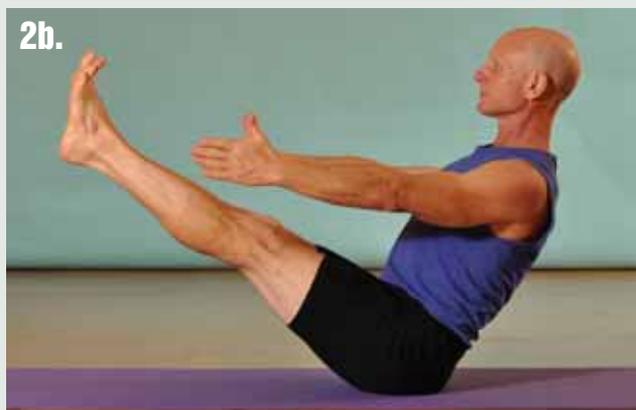
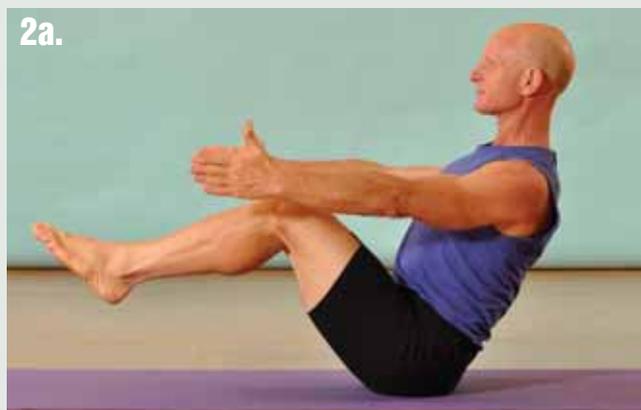
Contraindications and cautions

- People with neck injuries including disc, soft tissue, nerve, and whiplash injuries should not do the freestanding variation.
- People with any nerve impingement issues such as numbness, or pain radiating down the arms should only do the passive wall variation.
- People with eye problems, especially where there is excess pressure, should not do the pose.
- Anyone with high blood pressure are advised not to do the free-standing variation.
- During menstruation, the legs up wall, hips on floor variation may help to relieve menstrual cramps. The other variations are to be avoided during this time.

B. Preparation for free-standing pose

Preparatory poses

1. Bridge Pose (Setu bandhasana). This asana opens the chest and strengthens the back of the shoulders and inter-scapular muscles. Perhaps the most essential action for practising Viparita Karani safely is to be able to draw the shoulder blades towards the spine. This will prevent collapsing weight onto the sensitive neck area.
2. Boat Pose (Navasana). This pose strengthens the abdominal muscles, hip flexors, and quadriceps. This strength is vital to enter and exit Viparita Karani safely, as well as to sustain it. Shown are two variations. Keep the arms level with the floor and breathe into the chest area. Allow some weight to come back towards the buttocks as you sustain the pose.



Vital practice tips for free standing Viparita Karani

- Using folded blankets under the shoulders serves to protect the cervical spine. Fold two to five blankets into rectangles that are wider than the shoulders and as long as the spine. The head is off the blankets. Placing a yoga mat on top of the blankets will help to keep the elbows from splaying open.
- Entering and exiting the pose needs to be done with awareness. If you do not know your body's capabilities, do not attempt to roll up into the pose. Use a chair (as shown) to press your feet into to lift the hips up.
- Once in the pose, do not turn the head; keep it centred.
- Centre most of the weight across the back of the shoulders and upper arms. Only a little weight should be on the neck.
- Avoid collapsing the abdomen onto the chest. This will round the back and place pressure on the neck. Consistent work in Bridge Pose with the hands interlaced will help to strengthen the back and open the chest and abdomen.
- Explore the torso to leg positioning. You may find if the legs are vertical, there may be excess pressure on the wrists and elbows. If the legs go too far over the head, the belly will compress into the chest pushing the neck into the floor. Find the balance for your body and encourage your students to do the same.
- If you are choosing to emphasise the therapeutic aspect of the pose and want to hold it for a long time, a wall variation may be best for you.
- Let the breath flow naturally; relax the throat and face. Stay in the finished pose for at least three minutes to begin to experience the deep benefits.
- Come out of the pose carefully, reversing the steps, one by one.

In yogic texts, Viparita Karani is considered a mudra – a position that affects the flow of prana and consciousness.

Adam and his partner Akash are co-founders of Radiant Light Yoga. Adam and Akash teach classes, retreats, and courses from Nataraja Yoga Temple on their 30-acre property in the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. Radiant Light Yoga is taught in alignment with the yamas and niyamas, and is inspired by the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda.

Visit www.radiantlightyoga.com for more information.

Three different ways to come into the pose

1a.



1b.



1. Using a wall and a chair.

Place a chair against a wall as shown. Begin by lying on the back using the blankets as described. Place the feet towards the front edge of the chair. Either hold onto the front legs of the chair, or place a strap around the front legs and take hold of the two ends of the strap. Press the feet into the chair and begin curling the spine up off the blankets. Explore this movement on an inhalation. Once the pelvis is up, exhale and walk the shoulder blades in towards the spine. Lift up one leg at a time into Viparita Karani.

1c.



2a.



2b.



2. Transition from Bridge Pose

(as shown earlier as a preparatory pose).

After interlacing the fingers under the back and walking the shoulder blades inward toward the spine, bend the elbows and place the hands on the lower back. At this point, the thumbs will be facing the spine with the fingers towards the sides. Walk the feet a bit closer towards the elbows and towards each other. Lift the heels up, which will start the process of transferring more weight onto the shoulders. On an exhalation, lift up one knee towards the chest (as shown). Bring the lifted knee towards the face and bring the lower leg to vertical. On an exhalation, draw up the other knee. At this point, turn the hands so the thumbs face outward and the fingers turn in. Once both knees are up, explore resting some weight back towards the hands (as shown), before straightening the legs.

Counter pose

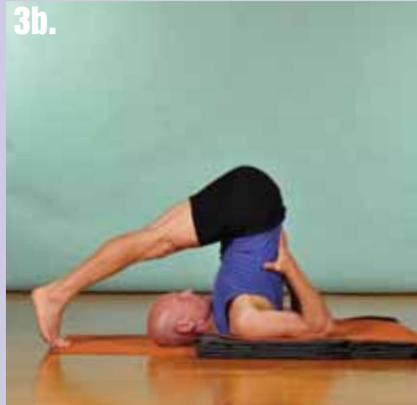
An excellent way to conclude the practice of Viparita Karani is to simply lie in Relaxation Pose (Shavasana). Close the eyes, be still, and absorb the subtle power and deep peace flowing through you. Be here at least eight minutes.

Three different ways to come into the pose (cont)

3a.



3b.



3. Transition from Halasana

Interlacing the hands behind the back in Plow Pose (Halasana) allows you to perform the essential action of walking the shoulder blades in towards the spine. Then, support the back with the hands and lift up, one leg at a time, or both together if it is right for you, into Viparita Karani. Deliver the hips back into the hands and find the perfect weight transference across the back of the shoulders, and along the back of the upper arms.

3c.



Conclusion

All of nature is pulsing with a harmonious rhythm that sustains life. In today's fast-paced world, we can lose sight of our own balance between activity and rest; between outward expression and inward peace. There is a time to act with determination and there is a time to rejuvenate. It behoves us to align ourselves with this balanced rhythm if we want to be vital and contented. How much less strife would there be in the world if everyone practised Viparita Karani and Shavasana every day!

From practising these poses consistently our perspective naturally shifts from over-striving outwardly, to inwardly abiding in the radiant stillness of our Self. Viparita Karani is truly a gift from the ancient masters of yoga, who unravelled the mysteries of existence. From their guidance, we learn to reorient and realign our awareness inside to discover the spiritual wealth waiting there.