

back to freedom

Learn key actions to open tight spots and enjoy Shoulderstand.

Shoulderstand has been called the queen of asanas. If you naturally experience the benefits that this pose can deliver—open shoulders, toned legs, a calm and peaceful mind—then the designation “queen” might seem warranted. But if Shoulderstand leaves you feeling smothered, strained, or otherwise irritated, you might regard her as a tyrant rather than a majestic ruler.

Using props can change your relationship to this sovereign pose. In order to feel freedom in Shoulderstand, you need to create spaciousness in the shoulders and neck. If you practice the pose without props, this is harder to do. You’re likely to lift your shoulders toward your ears or squeeze them toward the spine in order to support yourself. Over time, these actions can irritate the upper fibers of the trapezius muscles and strain the neck. When you reduce strain, you can hold the pose longer and receive the benefits of a well-supported Shoulderstand.

A final tip for working with a queen: Approach the relationship with a specific protocol to get favorable results. Shoulderstand can be a beneficial pose for most practitioners, but it often requires trial and error for the relationship to mature.



action plan

The main action to focus on in this sequence is protraction, or moving the shoulder blades away from the spine. Placing a strap around the upper arms will allow you to do this without separating the arm bones. (If the arms move away from each other, you’re more likely to collapse onto your neck.) Remember

that some actions are not big, grand movements. They’re subtle forces that aren’t always visible to the eye.

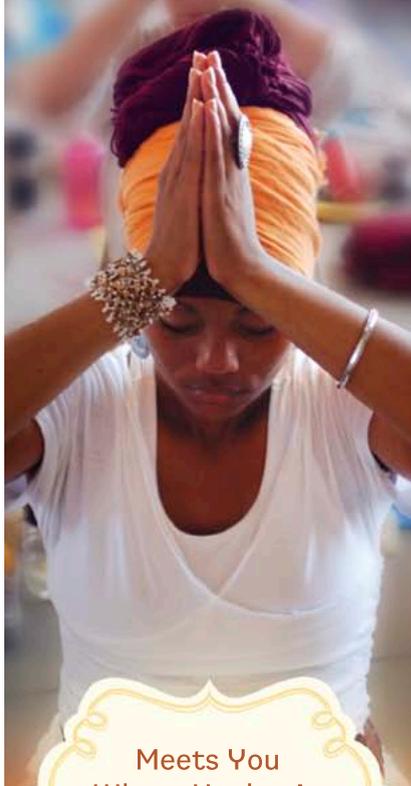
The other key actions are the extension and external rotation of the upper arms, and the firming of the bottom tips of your shoulder blades against your back without overcontracting the upper and middle fibers of your trapezius muscles.

the end game

When you can maintain all three of these actions, your Shoulderstand will begin to feel lifted and light. Ideally, you won’t feel any pain or strain in the neck or shoulders during or after the pose.

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warm-up

To prepare your body for the actions of Shoulderstand, do a well-rounded practice of standing poses, seated postures, and backbends. Focus on warming up your shoulders, opening your chest, and externally rotating your arm bones. Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II) with your arms in Garudasana (Eagle Pose) will stretch the upper and middle fibers

of your trapezius. Prone backbends such as Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) will warm up your shoulders and provide a stretch across the front of your chest. Salabhasana (Locust Pose) with your hands clasped behind you will externally rotate your arm bones. Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) and Ustrasana (Camel Pose) both extend the arm bones.



uttanasana *standing forward bend*

propping Blocks for hands

why this works By placing your hands on blocks, you will be able to bend your elbows in Uttanasana. This will give you some play to explore the key relationships between your hands, arms, shoulder blades, upper back, and neck. If you develop an understanding of these key ingredients in Uttanasana, it will be easier to access them in Bridge Pose and Shoulderstand.

how to Stand in the middle of your mat and place a block next to each foot. If your forward bends are tight, stack two blocks on top of each other. Engage your legs, rock your pelvis forward, and fold into Uttanasana. Place your hands on the blocks and align your wrist creases with your ankle creases.

In Uttanasana, shift your attention to your upper body. First, press the circumference of each hand and the base of each finger evenly into the block. It's common in Shoulderstand to press the pinkie side of the hand into the back of the rib cage and allow the thumb side to be too light. Since this provides inadequate and unbalanced support, it is essential to learn how to work your hands properly.

As you root evenly into the block with your hands, bend your elbows and gently press them straight back. Gently hug your elbows toward your outer shins and feel how this creates space in your upper back and neck. Complement this by gently widening your collarbones and broadening your chest. Allow your head and neck to feel as if they hang from the space between your shoulder blades. Take 5 to 10 breaths before coming out of the posture.

Accessing these actions in Bridge Pose and Shoulderstand will be different because your upper back will be moving toward a backbend and you will be supporting your body weight. But the sensations in your upper body in Uttanasana will provide you with a blueprint for re-creating them in the other postures.



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salamba setu bandha sarvangasana *supported bridge pose*

propping Two blocks for feet, blankets under shoulders, strap around upper arms

why this works When you place your feet on blocks, you will be able to lift your pelvis higher, which will make it easier to take your upper body closer to the shape of Shoulerstand. With the strap around your arms, practice broadening across your collarbone and upper trapezius muscles without separating your arms (which would cause your neck to collapse toward the floor). The blankets create space underneath your neck so that it doesn't flatten against the floor.

how to Finding the correct placement of your blankets and blocks will take some trial and error. Fortunately, once you find it, you can easily re-create this setup. To begin, make a loop in your strap and place it around your upper arms. Bend your elbows and press your upper arms against the strap. The strap should prevent your arms from separating wider than your shoulders. At the same time, it shouldn't feel overly restrictive.

Set your strap aside and place two blocks hip-width apart on the front of your mat. Stack one or two folded blankets on your mat a foot or two behind the blocks. Lie on the blankets in such a way that your shoulders are an inch below the top edge and your head is on

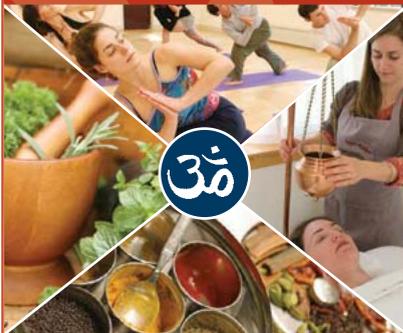
the floor. Place your feet on the blocks. Take a moment to adjust the position of your feet and the blocks. You want your heels close to your sitting bones and your shins nearly vertical.

Add the strap and come into the pose. Loop the strap around one of your arms, lift your hips into Bridge Pose, and slide your other arm through the strap.

Externally rotate your upper arms so that your palms face the ceiling. Press your arms out into the strap. Gently widen your collarbones and observe the feeling of broadness in your chest and upper back. Encourage your thoracic spine to lift deeper into the backbend as you roll higher onto your shoulders. Support this lift by firming your shoulder blades against the back of your ribs without squeezing them toward the spine. This subtle action requires awareness and practice. Continue to create these gentle widening actions in your upper body and feel the ease it creates in your neck. After 5 to 10 breaths in the pose, release the strap from one of your arms and slowly lower your hips all the way down to the floor.

At first, the widening actions of your shoulder blades, upper arms, and chest can be done safely only when your arms are secured with a strap. The strap contains the arms so that you can create these broadening actions without moving the arms wider than your shoulders and collapsing your base of support.

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salamba sarvangasana supported shoulderstand

how to Place one to four folded blankets on the middle of your mat. The number of blankets you use depends on your shoulder flexibility and the proportions of your upper body. In general, if you have less flexible shoulders or a long neck, you may require three or four blankets. If you have more flexible shoulders or a shorter neck and longer arms, you may require fewer. You will know that you have the right number for your body when your posture feels stable, the weight is rooted through your upper arms and the tops of your shoulders, and your neck and chest feel spacious.

Loop your strap around one of your elbows (*to measure your strap, see the earlier instructions for Setu Bandha Sarvangasana on page 58*) and lie back over your blankets so that your shoulders are approximately 1 inch from the top edge. The loop in your strap should be narrow enough that when you broaden your chest and

propping Blankets under shoulders, strap around upper arms

why this works Without adequate support, the tendency in Shoulderstand is to lift the shoulder blades and squeeze them toward the spine. It's also common to compress the neck, reversing the natural curvature of the cervical spine. Propping yourself on one to four blankets will keep your weight off your neck and on your shoulders. The strap around your elbows allows you to create a broadening action across the chest and upper back without separating your arms.

spread your shoulder blades, your arms and shoulders don't separate wider than shoulder distance.

Gently lift your hips, lower back, and upper back away from the floor and draw your knees toward your forehead. If you are more flexible, you can straighten your legs and take Halasana (Plow Pose). Externally rotate your upper arms so that your palms face the ceiling, and gently press your arms out against the strap. Bend your elbows and place your hands on your back with your fingertips pointing toward the ceiling. Straighten your legs toward the ceiling and keep them strongly activated.

Now, bring your attention to the actions of the upper body. With your weight evenly balanced between your shoulders and elbows, lift the back of your ribs and press the bottom tips of your shoulder blades into your back. Gently widen your collarbones and spread your shoulder blades as you press your upper arms into the strap. Feel expansion across the front of your chest and ease in your neck. Continue to deepen these actions as you hold the pose for 1 to 3 minutes.

To release, lower your feet to the floor in Halasana or bend your knees toward your forehead. Slide the strap off one arm and slowly lower your middle back, lower back, and hips to the floor. ❀

Jason Crandell teaches alignment-based vinyasa yoga workshops and teacher trainings around the world. For more information, visit him at jasonyoga.com.